

Stranger Falls by Mozart_the_Meerkitten

Series: [Stranger Falls AU \[1\]](#)

Category: Gravity Falls, Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst, Blood and Injury, Canon-Typical Violence, Child Abuse, Emotional Manipulation, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, Family Fluff, Found Family, Friendship, Gen, Gravity Falls - Freeform, Hurt/Comfort, I have merged Gravity Falls and Hawkins Indiana, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Memory Erasing Gun (Gravity Falls), Mystery Trio, Panic Attacks, Pillow & Blanket Forts, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Tags to be added, The Upside Down, bill and the mind flayer are only in this for about 2 minutes at the end but they exist, shenanigans ensue, the Mystery Trio adopt Eleven

Language: English

Characters: Bill Cipher, Demogorgon (Stranger Things), Dr. Brenner, Eleven, Fiddleford H. McGucket, Ford Pines, Shadow Monster | Mind Flayer, Stan Pines

Relationships: Fiddleford H. McGucket & Ford Pines, Fiddleford H. McGucket & Stan Pines, Fiddleford McGucket & Eleven, Ford Pines & Eleven, Ford Pines & Stan Pines, Stan Pines & Eleven

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Summary:

While tracking an unknown creature through the forest, the Mystery Trio encounters a strange little girl named Eleven. As they take her home and begin to care for her they realize that there is much more to her than meets the eye...

1. The Girl in the Woods

Author's Note:

So I need another writing project like I need a hole in the head, but this wasn't going to go away till I sat down and wrote it, so I figured I might as well share. Not sure how far I'll get with it, but I hope you enjoy whatever I do end up posting. Exactly what it says on the tin. No shipping of any kind, just good ole adventure and found family.

Also, as a random side note, Eleven is 10 years old instead of 12 in this fic, and it is purely because I want her to be.

“Ford, how much longer are we gonna be out here? It’s gettin’ dark.”

Ford glanced up from his scrutiny of the tracks in front of him and frowned at his brother. “There’s still at least an hour of daylight left,” he said.

“Not with those clouds moving in there ain’t,” argued Stan, pointing at the sky. Stormclouds scudded over it, and the treetops swayed in the wind.

“These tracks will disappear if it rains,” argued Ford. “Plus they’re very fresh, we’re most likely close to whatever made them.”

A slightly hysterical laugh came from the third member of their party. “Yeah, because we should definitely be tryin’ to find a monster in the dark in the middle of a storm, that’s real smart Ford,” said Fiddleford.

The wind began to pick up. Ford’s frown deepened as raindrops began to patter down onto the path around them.

“We don’t get opportunities like this often,” he tried. “We should keep going, at least until the rain really starts.”

“Sorry, Sixer, but I’m with Fidds on this one,” said Stan. “We can head back out here after the storm’s over and look again, but for

now we'd better get home before we get soaked."

"Or ambushed by the monster that made them tracks," muttered Fiddleford.

Ford grumbled for a minute. "Fine," he finally muttered, straightening up and folding his arms.

"Good," said Stan. "Now let's-"

"Shh!" Fiddleford held up a hand.

"What?" Stan whispered, frowning.

"I heard somethin'," said Fiddleford, head cocked to one side.

"The creature?" Ford said, hopefully.

"I sure hope not," said Fiddleford. "But it sounds too quiet."

Cautiously they slipped through the trees, listening. Rain began to pour down on them, and thunder boomed overhead.

And then-

"There!" Fiddleford pointed and they could see a slight movement in the trees. A moment later lightning flashed and illuminated-

-The small form of a girl, watching them with wide eyes.

The lightning faded and they stood frozen for a second. Stan flicked a flashlight on and the girl threw up her arms as the light landed on her. She was thin and wore nothing but a white hospital gown. She looked no more than nine or ten years old.

Stan moved the flashlight off her and she slowly lowered her arms and wrapped them around herself.

Fiddleford walked forward and knelt down a few feet from her. "Hey there," he said quietly. "Are you lost, little one?"

Slowly, the girl nodded. Fiddleford smiled at her.

"Why don't y'come home with me and my friends. We'll get y'dried off and warmed up and go from there, okay?"

The girl hesitated. She looked... scared. Fiddleford let the smile drop off his face and looked at her earnestly.

"We won't hurt you," he said. "I promise. And shucks, you

must be freezin' dressed like that, where are my manners?" he started to pull his coat off, but Stan tapped him.

"Here, Fidds," he said, quietly, holding out his own coat. Fiddleford grinned at him briefly then took it and slowly approached the little girl. She shrank back for a moment, but let him drape the coat over her shoulders. She pulled it tight around herself and looked up at him uncertainly.

"There ya go," said Fiddleford, kneeling down again. "My name's Fiddleford, and those two fellers are Stanley and Stanford. What's your name?"

There was a long pause, then, in a quiet voice the girl said, "Eleven."

Fiddleford very quickly hid the surprised look on his face at that. Stan and Ford did not, and they frowned openly at this- not that the girl could see them in the dark.

"Alright then, Eleven," said Fiddleford. "You gonna come home with us then?"

They were taking her home whether she wanted it or not, he knew, since there was no way any of them were going to let a child wander around the forest alone in a thunderstorm, but he would much rather that she went with them willingly.

Finally, Eleven nodded. Fiddleford smiled at her again, relieved. "Alright then, we'd better get a move on before we're soaked."

Eleven followed them back to the cabin, with Fiddleford keeping hold of her hand so that they didn't lose her in the dark. Once they were back Fiddleford took her upstairs to find her some dry clothes.

Stan and Ford stood just inside the house, dripping water on the floor, both lost in their own thoughts.

However, Ford's thoughts often didn't stay in his head for very long, which was the case here.

"I wonder if she's an anomaly," he said after a few moments.

Stan whipped around to stare at him. "Really? We find a little kid in the woods and that's your first thought?"

"Not my first thought," said Ford, folding his arms. "But it's a valid question. Why would a small child be wandering around the woods alone, in the middle of a thunderstorm, dressed in only a thin gown?"

"Maybe she ran away," said Stan. "She seemed pretty scared to me. Maybe she got put in the hospital because somebody did somethin' to her and she ran away before whoever it was could get back to hurt her again."

Ford frowned. "I suppose that's... possible," he finally conceded.

"It's a heck of a lot more likely than her being an anomaly," said Stan. "Anyway, it doesn't really matter right now. We can see what Fidds thinks of her later- jeeze I'm glad that guy knows something about kids- for now I'm gonna go change then make us something to eat."

Ford bit back a reply that Eleven being an anomaly was entirely possible considering the strange things they'd found in the woods and instead took off his coat and hung it up. "Fine. I'm going to record the day's events."

"Alright, these ain't really gonna fit you, but it'll do till we can get you some proper clothes."

Fiddleford had dug out a t-shirt, sweater and some socks from his closet. There wasn't any point in bothering with pants, but the shirt and sweater reached to her knees when he got them on her, so it didn't really matter.

Eleven watched him and let him help her change without protest. Her eyes darted around the room, and she still seemed scared

of something. The sweater and the socks seemed to help with her shivering, at least.

The thunder boomed outside and she flinched visibly. Fiddleford frowned and laid a hand on her arm and she turned back to him instantly, eyes wide.

“It’s okay,” he said, giving her a little smile. “It’s just thunder.”

She didn’t look like she understood, but she nodded once anyway.

“How old are you, Eleven?” he asked.

She frowned, considering this. “Ten,” she said, finally.

Fiddleford nodded. She was small for a ten-year-old, and skinny too. That, coupled with how nervous and quiet she was, was making him suspicious of what kind of place she had come from.

“How’s about we go see what the others are doing?” he suggested after a moment. She nodded, and he stood. He offered her his hand again and, after a moment of hesitation, her cold little fingers wrapped around his again.

Eleven followed Fiddleford downstairs, looking around curiously. This was nothing like the bad place. The walls were brown instead of white and the hallways were small and snug. The lights weren’t so bright they hurt her eyes and even through the strange feeling of socks on her feet she could tell the floors were different.

The downstairs of the house was filled with strange things she didn’t understand. Papers and drawings and pieces of metal and plastic in weird shapes lay scattered about.

Before she could try to puzzle any of it out though they stepped into a new room with counters and cabinets and a table in the middle of it. The table didn’t look like others she’d seen either, it was brown, and when she hesitantly reached out a hand to touch it it was cold, but not cold like the metal tables she was used to.

“Hey kid.”

The voice startled her and she jumped, looking up at one of the other men who had been in the forest. She wasn't sure which one he was.

He set a plate down on the table in front of her with some sort of food on it and she felt her stomach growl. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten.

“All we got to eat in this house is bread and peanut butter,” said the man, shrugging. “Gonna have to go to the store tomorrow.”

He seemed to be talking to Fiddleford. Eleven sat down, watching them, trying to ignore the bread-and-peanut-butter. She wasn't sure if she was allowed to eat it or not.

“Anyway, here Fidds,” he handed a plate with more of the bread and peanut butter on it to the other man. “Ford come out yet?”

Fiddleford sat down next to her. “Thanks, Stanley. An' no, I didn't see him.”

So this one was Stanley. Eleven nodded to herself and studied his face for a moment until she was sure she could remember it.

“Better call him then,” said Stan. He walked to the doorway and-

“HEY FORD! GET OUT HERE AND EAT WOULD YA?”

Before she realized what she was doing, Eleven had dove under the table, stifling a cry. She curled up, arms wrapped around her knees, eyes wide. Above her she could hear the men talking.

“Stanley!”

“What?”

“*Shut up.*”

“Wha- oh. Whoops.”

Two faces peeked under the table at her. She squeezed herself tighter.

"Eleven, it's okay," said Fiddleford, softly, slipping under the table with her.

"Yeah, kid, sorry, I didn't mean to scare ya," said Stanley.

"Stanley's real loud, that's all," said Fiddleford. "He ain't mad, it's just what he's like, okay?"

Slowly, she nodded, rubbing her eyes.

"Alright. Why don't y'come up and eat somethin' then?"

Fiddleford offered her his hand and, after a moment, she took it and they slipped out from under the table.

"Sorry about that, kid," said Stan. "You, uh, okay?"

Slowly she nodded at him.

"Alright, well, you can, uh, have your sandwich," Stan waved his hand. "I'm gonna go drag my brother out of his room."

A few minutes later, Eleven looked up from her second sandwich as Stanley and the other one, Stanford, entered. The three men started talking and she was content to ignore them at first.

But she could feel eyes on her, and when she looked up she could see Stanford staring at her. She looked down quickly, but she felt his staring continue. She didn't like it. It scared her, it reminded her of...

Eleven squeezed her eyes shut and tried to breathe. She wasn't there. She was okay, she was safe. She was safe.

But when she glanced up, Stanford was still staring at her.

2. Books and Nicknames

Summary for the Chapter:

“So, we’re keeping her?” Ford asked, mildly.

“Yes,” said Fiddleford and Stan in unison.

Fiddleford looked at the little girl miserably curled up on the bed across from him, flinching every time thunder boomed above them. The only place they could come up with to put Eleven on short notice was with him in the attic. Stan and Ford had dug out a mattress from somewhere in the house and covered it with a spare sheet and some blankets. They’d even found a spare pillow stashed somewhere.

At the moment though, Eleven was sitting up on the bed, a blanket clutched in her hands, eyes wide. Fiddleford, who had been trying to write down some of the day’s events in a vain attempt to process them, kept finding his eyes drawn back to her. Finally, after a particularly loud explosion of thunder where the little girl whimpered and covered her head with her hands, he couldn’t take it anymore and walked over to sit on the edge of her bed.

“Eleven?” he said, softly. She opened her eyes and looked at him. “It’s okay, it’s only thunder, it can’t hurt you.”

She gave him the same not-really-understanding look as earlier. He thought for a moment- he had a lot of younger siblings and cousins, so he’d had some experience explaining these things. “Y’know, thunder’s really just clouds running into each other,” he told her.

She frowned, and he smiled a little. He turned and sat crosslegged on the bed so he could see her properly.

“During a storm, clouds get blown into each other, and when they crash together it makes that loud noise,” he said. It wasn’t quite a scientific explanation, but it would do.

Eleven’s expression cleared a little, and she nodded again, a little more confidently this time. Fiddleford paused for a moment, debating the wisdom of adding his next words. Finally, he decided he had nothing to lose and plowed forward.

“Course there’s also people who think they’re giants throwin’ rocks at each other.”

Eleven frowned. “Giants?” she repeated. It was only the third word she’d said, in the same almost monotone voice as before.

But he grinned and nodded at her. “Ever heard of a book called *The Hobbit*?”

Still frowning, she shook her head. Her next words rocked him a little.

“What is, book?” she asked, tilting her head.

Fiddleford blinked at her. “You, you don’t know what books are?”

She looked nervous and shook her head. Fiddleford took a deep breath and climbed off the bed. He came back a moment later with a green, hardcover book in his hand.

He sat next to her on the bed and held it out. “This is a book,” he said. He flipped it open and showed her the inside. “See? There’s words on each page an’ they tell a story. This story in particular is called *The Hobbit*.” He showed her the title on the cover.

Gently, reverently, Eleven ran her fingers over the words. “Hobbit,” she repeated, quietly.

“That’s right,” Fiddleford nodded. He hesitated, then added. “D’you want me to read some of it to you?”

She looked at him uncertainly, then finally nodded. He grinned.

“Alright then. Here, pull the blanket up over you, there y’go, and get comfy there. Now, let’s see,” he opened the book and cleared his throat. “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit...”

After Eleven had fallen asleep, Fiddleford crept downstairs and joined Ford and Stan in the living room.

“Alright,” said Stan. “So what are the theories about our new

little friend?"

"I still think it's possible she could be an anomaly," said Ford, a stubborn edge to his voice.

"She can't read," Fiddleford said abruptly. "She didn't even know what a book was. I think somebody abused her."

"I agree," said Stan, nodding. "What d'you think? She ran away from a hospital somebody put her in and ended up in the woods?"

Fiddleford nodded. "Seems entirely possible," his voice hardened. "Sure would like to meet whoever's responsible for makin' her so scared of everythin'. I've got words for them."

"I've got something more than words," growled Stan.

"So, we're keeping her?" Ford asked, mildly.

"Yes," said Fiddleford and Stan in unison. They shared a look then turned back to Ford.

"Great," said Ford, not bothering to argue the point. "What do we do now then?"

"Well," said Fiddleford. "We gotta go out to get groceries tomorrow anyway. Might as well stop an' get her some clothes."

"We can take her with us," said Stan.

"And while you're gone I'm going to do some research," said Ford.

Stan gave him a look. "You'd better not be planning to go out in that forest alone looking for whatever we were following tonight."

Ford looked down and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Of course not," he mumbled, making it clear that this had, indeed, been his plan. He glanced up. "But there's plenty I can do here. Figuring out the distance between here and the nearest hospital is first and foremost on the list."

"That's reasonable," said Stan. "Welp, guess we'd better get some sleep then."

Eleven stared out the window of Stan's 'car', eyes wide as she took in the buildings of the small town Fiddleford had told her was called Gravity Falls. She was struggling to make sense of it all, but it fascinated her.

It was also a welcome distraction from all her worried thoughts. Thoughts of her escape, the lab, and the bad men no doubt trying to find her made her nervous.

But there was also Stanford. He had continued to watch her today, and it scared her. He looked at her the way the people at the lab had, and they were bad people. She was very glad to not be in the house with him anymore.

The car stopped in front of a square building. She looked at it curiously, and listened to Stanley and Fiddleford talk.

"This ain't gonna take long," said Fiddleford.

"Probably don't need both of us either," agreed Stan. "Why don't you go in and I'll stay with the kid?" he craned his neck around the seat to look at her. "That alright with you, kid?"

She nodded hesitantly. After a pause she heard Fiddleford say, "Alright. I won't be long."

Then he slipped out of the car and left her alone with Stan.

A minute went by, then Stan spoke. "Hey kid, why don't you climb up here, I wanna talk to you about somethin'."

Eleven hesitated, suddenly scared again.

Stan looked back at her and his voice softened. "Come on, kid, I'm not gonna hurt you, I just wanna talk, okay?"

Slowly, she nodded. Deciding it would be better to just do what he said she climbed into the other seat next to him and sat with her knees pressed against her chest.

"Hey, kid, El, look at me," said Stan. She did, eyes wide.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," Stan continued, quietly. "None of us is gonna hurt you, no matter what anybody did to you before, okay?"

She nodded. She wanted to believe him, but...

Her eyes slid away from his and she looked down. He sighed.

"I know you're scared of Ford."

She looked up at him quickly, but he didn't seem angry. He smiled at her a little.

"I know, he's kinda weird. But he doesn't mean anything,

okay? He's not gonna hurt you either. Which, uh, brings me to my question; why are you scared of him?"

Eleven curled her toes and hugged her knees. "Watches me," she said finally in a very small voice. She shrank down further against the seat. "Like the bad men."

"Bad men, from where you came from?" Stan asked.
She nodded.

"Aw, kid," Stan sighed. "Look, Ford's a little off in the head sometimes, but he'd never hurt a kid. And he wouldn't wanna be scaring you either. Hey," he set a hand on her shoulder and she flinched, but looked up at him.

He pulled his hand back but looked at her earnestly. "I'll talk to him, okay? Try and get this sorted out, how's that?"

She nodded again and he sighed again and leaned back into his seat, putting a hand over his eyes.

A few minutes passed before she tried to speak again.

"What's... El?" she asked, finally, frowning.

"Huh?" Stan turned and looked at her.

"El," she repeated.

"Oh, er, I guess it's a nickname for you," said Stan, shrugging. "I tend to do that, give people nicknames."

"Nick-names?" Eleven tilted her head.

"Yeah, it's like a shorter version of your name," said Stan. "Like I'm Stan, short for Stanley. Ford is short for Stanford, Fidds is short for Fiddleford. You're El, short for Eleven. I mean-" he added quickly. "If you wanna be. I ain't gonna force it on you."

She considered this, then nodded once. "El." she said decisively.

Stan grinned a little. "There ya go. Who knows, y'might even pick up some more."

"More?"

"Yeah, like I call Ford Sixer and Pointdexter, and Fidds is Fiddlenerd."

El frowned again. "Not shorter," she informed him seriously.

Stan laughed a little. "Yeah, nicknames aren't always shorter versions of someone's name. Just depends on how ya get 'em."

"Oh."

“Mhm.”

They were quiet again, but not a bad kind of quiet, El decided, a nice one, where no one expected her to do anything and she wasn't going to get in trouble for not talking. She decided she liked it.

Not long after that, Fiddleford returned and stashed quite a few bags in the “trunk” of the car. El climbed back to her seat and he got in the car.

“So did you two have a nice chat while I was gone?” Fiddleford asked.

“As a matter of fact we did,” said Stan. “Tell ‘im what we’re callin’ you now, kid.”

She grinned. “El, short for Eleven. Nick-name,” she said, very pleased.

Fiddleford laughed. “Well ain’t that a fine thing. Alright then, El,” he looked back at her and smiled. She smiled back. “Ready to get some new clothes?”

El did not like the mall.

Outside had been okay. It was filled with other cars and not many people. But as soon as they walked inside-

There were colors everywhere, bright, moving, flashing, blurry, too many, too bright, and loud, it was loud, people talking, walking, laughing, shouting, moving, and there were smells, too many, good, bad, sweet, stinky, can’t tell, can’t tell, too much- !

Eleven let out a whimper and Stan and Fiddleford looked down to see that her eyes were shut tight and her hands were over her ears. Even as they watched she sank to the ground, shaking her

head.

“Oh jeeze, is she okay?” Stan asked, worriedly.

“I don’t know,” said Fiddleford, kneeling down in front of the girl. After a moment, Stan did the same. “El?” Fiddleford asked quietly. “El can you hear me?”

He laid a hand on her arm and she jumped, but her eyes opened and focused on him.

“El, what’s wrong?” he asked.

She shook her head, and he could see tears forming in her eyes. “Bright,” she murmured. “Loud. Can’t-” she shut her eyes again and whimpered.

“Okay, okay, El, here, stand up, okay?” Fiddleford put a hand on her other arm to steady her and they stood slowly. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and looked at Stan.

“Should we... take her back to the car?” Stan asked uncertainly.

“Well we can’t make her stay here, that’s for sure,” Fiddleford looked worried. “Maybe you can take her back out an’ I’ll try to get her some clothes?”

“Okay, yeah, yeah, I can do that,” Stan nodded quickly. He knelt down again. “El, hey, El,” she opened her eyes and watched him. “You wanna go back to the car with me?”

El nodded. Fiddleford didn’t realize she’d been hanging onto him until she detached herself and shifted over to Stan. Stan gave Fiddleford a final worried look and guided the little girl outside again.

Fiddleford took a deep breath, then rushed through the first clothing shop he saw, grabbing a variety of little girl clothes he thought would fit El and hurrying up to pay for them at the register, mumbling something to the cashier about a cousin’s daughter being in town, then dashed back out to the car.

“You okay, El?” he asked as soon as he’d thrown the clothes in the trunk.

El, curled up on the front seat, nodded. She looked tired.

“Alright, let’s get y’home then,” he said.

He climbed into the back seat, content to let her stay up front if she wanted to. After a moment, however, El climbed into the backseat and curled up next to him.

Fiddleford wrapped an arm around her and sighed, looking down at the little girl, wondering what had happened to make her like this.

And, more importantly, how they could start to fix it.

3. Freaks

Notes for the Chapter:

And now for an entire chapter of Ford acting like the awkward disaster he is as he tries to bond with Eleven. xD

Also, in case it's not clear I am not proofreading any of these I'm just posting them. for fun, y'know. I hope you're all enjoying.

"Eleven is afraid of me?"

Ford seemed genuinely surprised, which, Stan reflected, was very in character for him.

"She said you keep staring at her and it reminds her of where she used to live," said Stan.

"I haven't been watching her that much," mumbled Ford.

Stan sighed. "Jeeze, Ford, she's not one of your lab experiments. Staring at anybody like that is creepy."

"I don't do it on purpose," snapped Ford. "But when I'm focusing on a problem I tend to stare at it."

"So the kid's a *problem* now?"

"No! I mean, that isn't what I meant," Ford sighed. "There's something about her that doesn't make sense and I can't seem to figure out what it is."

"Well you're gonna get a chance to ask her," said Stan. "You gotta talk to her, Ford."

"What?! Stanley, you want me to talk to the child who's afraid of me?" Ford stared at him with deep confusion in his eyes. "Won't that only frighten her more?"

"This isn't gonna go away, Ford," said Stan, folding his arms. "You gotta work it out before it gets worse."

"Why can't you and Fiddleford talk to her? Tell her not to be scared of me?" Ford demanded.

"I tried that today," said Stan. "It didn't work. It isn't *going* to work. *You* have to be the one who talks to her."

"But what do I say? Do I just tell her not to be scared of me?"

"No, I mean, yeah, you can, but you gotta show her you're not a person to be scared of," said Stan. "I mean, it shouldn't be too hard, you're a massive nerd, it's pretty hard to be scared of you."

Ford rolled his eyes. "Thank you, Stanley, but how do I... how do I show her that?"

Stan shrugged. "You're a smart guy, you'll think of something. You got till next week."

Ford spluttered. "Next week?!"

"Yep. Fidds and I will go out to get some groceries and whatever else we've figured out the kid needs in that time and leave you two alone. Plenty of time for you to have a nice heart-to-heart chat," Stan grinned a little.

Ford glared at him. "This is a bad idea."

"Well you're bound to fail with that attitude," said Stan. "C'mon, Ford, don't sell yourself short, you'll think of something."

Ford sighed resignedly. "I hate you sometimes."

Stan grinned. "I know."

The past week, Eleven had decided, had been the best one of her life so far.

No one had hurt her, yelled at her, or locked her up. She had plenty of food and she was warm and if she wanted to she could go outside and sit on the grass and listen to the wind. Stan and Fiddleford were there to help her if she got scared or didn't understand something. And every night before she went to sleep Fiddleford read her more of *The Hobbit*.

The only bad thing, really, was that she was still scared of Ford. He had stopped staring at her, but the way he acted still reminded her of the people at the bad place. He was very quiet and didn't really talk to her. Usually when she heard him he was arguing with Stan or Fiddleford about something. She avoided him whenever she could, and didn't talk to him.

So, she was very upset when Stan announced that he and

Fiddleford were going to the store and that she had to stay here with Ford.

“Why?” she asked, a little angry.

“It’s just for a little while, kid, it’ll be fine,” said Stan.

“Yeah, we won’t be gone long,” said Fiddleford. He smiled, but he wouldn’t look at her.

In the end, they left. El decided she was going to hide in her room until they came back.

She was doing this, trying to write the words from *The Hobbit* like Fiddleford had showed her, when there was a soft knock on the door. She jumped and tensed, clutching her pencil tighter.

There was a pause, then she heard Ford say, “Er, may I come in?”

She wasn’t really sure what would happen if she told him no, and as much as she didn’t want to find out what he wanted with her she was even more afraid to find out what he would do if she tried to fight. “Yes,” she said, quietly.

The door creaked open and Ford walked in, hands shoved in his pockets.

“Ah, hello,” he said. El frowned. He didn’t sound like he usually did. Almost like he was... scared? Why was *he* scared?

When she said nothing in return he took a small step forward. El sat up a little straighter and pulled back.

“Are you, er, reading *The Hobbit*?” Ford asked. She nodded. He nodded back and continued. “It’s a very good book. I read it several times as a child. I loved the creatures it talked about. Hobbits and dwarves and goblins and shapeshifters, and of course a dragon,” he smiled a little. “You know, there are a lot of creatures like that here in Gravity Falls. Some very similar to those in the book and some wildly different. And, ah, you- you know the pictures in the book?”

El nodded. She loved the pictures. They were bright and

interesting and sometimes funny. She had looked at all of them many times.

“Well, you know, the author of the book, Professor J.R.R. Tolkien, drew those himself,” Ford continued. “And, well, in a similar manner, I’ve drawn many of the creatures here in Gravity Falls and written things about them in my Journals. I wondered, I mean, would you be interested, would you like to see them?”

El tilted her head and considered this. She still wasn’t quite sure she liked Ford, but he wasn’t scaring her right now. She reached a decision, stood, and took a couple steps closer to him. Then, realizing she’d never actually given an answer, she nodded.

Ford gave her a very big smile. “Excellent! Follow me!”

He led her downstairs to his room. El hesitated. She wasn’t supposed to go in his room, or the basement. Stan and Fiddleford said they were dangerous.

“Oh, you can come in if I’m here,” said Ford, seeing her hesitation. “Just, er, be careful what you touch.”

El nodded and crept inside. Ford sat down at a desk and flipped open one of the big red books she had seen around. She slipped up beside him and looked at the book.

It did have pictures, and the creatures did look like the kind from *The Hobbit*. As she flipped through, Ford told her about the creatures on the pages she stopped at, pointing at them and explaining things that they could do or where they could be found in the forest.

El listened, but she also watched, and as she did she slowly began to realize something strange. She found herself staring at one of Ford’s hands pressed down on the page in front of her.

Ford abruptly stopped talking when he realized she was staring. “Oh, so you’ve, er, noticed my hands have you?”

El nodded. Now that his hand had stopped moving she’d had time to count his fingers and the number was wrong. She looked up at him and pointed at his hand. “Why?”

"It's a birth defect, a mutation," Ford shrugged.

El frowned, trying to find the right words. "From a lab?"

"Oh, no, I was just, I was born with twelve fingers," said Ford. "I've always had them. It's one of the reasons I came here to Gravity Falls to study all the strange creatures here, since I have my own... oddities. I'm not surprised you didn't notice it before, I, well, I try to keep it hidden. Most people think my hands make me a freak."

"Freak?" she repeated.

"Yes, er, strange, weird, unusual, wrong," Ford looked down at his hands and made a face. "And in the minds of some people, *bad*. I was made fun of quite a lot as a child for being strange."

He smiled in a not-really-real way. El watched him, thinking. Maybe Ford was nice? He didn't scare her now like he had, and he had let her ask questions and told her stories. If he was nice, like the others, then that meant there was no reason she couldn't...

But there was one more thing she wanted to make sure of.

"Study," she said.

Ford blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Study?" El repeated. "Study strange creatures. Not hurt them?"

"Well, no, I mean, not unless they mean to harm me. But I try to avoid causing harm to the creatures here, and I would rather observe their behavior from a distance so I- wait, why are you asking?" Ford frowned.

Eleven took a deep breath. Then she pointed at herself and said, very clearly, "Freak."

Ford stared at her for a moment, not understanding, then quickly shook his head, still not understanding. "No, Eleven, El, you're not a freak, I didn't mean to imply that I was just trying to explain-"

El shook her head and poked her chest harder. "*Freak*."

Then, before Ford could misunderstand again, she lifted her hand and focused on the cup on the table beside him.

"El, what are you doing?" said Ford, looking confused.

Then he turned and saw the cup. It hovered in the air, a few inches above the table.

Ford whipped around, looking at her and then at the floating cup. "What in the name of..." he whispered.

As Ford watched, she lowered the cup. He turned back to her, eyes wide, mouth open. El pointed at herself again.

"Freak," she said, quietly.

Ford looked at the now-still cup then back to her and slowly shook his head. "I... I may have given you the wrong idea about that word," he said with a not-quite-real smile again.

El grabbed one of his hands and held it up, then pressed her own against it. "Freaks," she said.

Ford laughed. "I suppose there's no getting out of it now. Ah well." He smiled at her, and this time it was real. "That is quite a remarkable skill you have. If, if you don't mind me asking, how did you get it?"

El shrank back and pulled her hand against her chest. "Bad men," she whispered, suddenly scared again.

Ford slipped out of his chair and knelt down in front of her. "El, I-I know you're scared of me. And, well, I'm sorry about that. But please believe me when I tell you that I will never, ever try to hurt you. I just want to help, and to understand. Because, well, the more I understand the more I can help. Do you- does that make sense?"

El nodded slowly. Ford smiled at her and held up his hand. "Freaks?"

She lifted her hand and pressed it against his. "Freaks." She agreed.

Ford grinned. "That's called a 'high six' by the way. The thing where you tap hands together. Well, I mean, most people call it a 'high five', because generally people have five fingers, but Stanley changed it for me when we were children."

El gave him a real smile. It was funny when he talked fast. He smiled back at her.

“Now!” he stood. “Would you like to hear more about the creatures of Gravity Falls?”

El nodded, still smiling. “Yes.”

4. Discoveries

Notes for the Chapter:

A bit of a shorter chapter this time, but Eleven is adorable and the boys are starting to put things together.

Stan and Fiddleford had barely shut the door of the cabin when Eleven came dashing up to meet them, which didn't seem to bode well for how things had gone in their absence.

However, a second glance revealed that the little girl was grinning and looking very pleased with herself, which was reassuring.

"Hi, El," said Fiddleford, finding it impossible to not smile back at her. "Things go okay while we were gone?"

She nodded, and, as if on cue, Ford slipped through the doorway and stood behind her, also grinning.

"Tell them what you learned about today, El," he said, encouragingly.

El's grin widened. "Anomalies," she said, pronouncing the word very carefully and very proudly.

It took a moment for that to register, then Stan snorted and Fiddleford shook his head.

"You showed her your Journals, didn't you?" said Stan. He ran a hand over his face. "Jeeze, I guess that's one way to bond with the kid."

"It seemed like a good idea," said Ford, just a little defensively. "After all, we do live surrounded by dangerous creatures. Teaching her to identify them seems prudent."

"Pictures," said El, solemnly. She looked at Fiddleford. "Like in *The Hobbit*."

Fiddleford chuckled. "Guess I can't really argue with that. I'm glad things went okay."

"El," said Ford, more seriously. "Will you show them what you showed me?"

El looked up at him and nodded. Ford produced a coffee mug

from behind his back and set it flat on his hand.

"Stanford, please tell me you didn't give her coffee," said Fiddleford in a tired voice.

"No!" said Ford quickly. "This is a demonstration."

"Of what?" Stan asked. "Your ability to hold a cup?"

Ford glared at him. Stan raised an eyebrow.

Eleven decided to ignore them. She lifted her hand and concentrated.

"What in tarnation?!" Fiddleford gasped, breaking the twins out of their staring contest.

Stan's eyes widened. "Holy Moses, kid."

Eleven lowered the mug and turned to look at them.

"Have you been able to do that this whole time?" asked Stan.

El nodded. She looked slightly worried.

Fiddleford knelt down in front of her. "That's quite a talent y'got there, El," he said, quietly. "Thanks for showin' it to us."

El's face lightened again and she smiled. She pointed at herself. "Freak!" she said, cheerfully.

Fiddleford blinked. "What." He turned his gaze on Ford. "What?"

"Er, she may have misunderstood when I tried to explain what the word meant," said Ford, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

"Ford, please tell me you didn't tell the kid she was a freak," said Stan.

"No! Of course not!" Ford shook his head vehemently. "I was trying to explain my hands and, well, she latched onto the word, I suppose."

El turned and pointed at Ford. "Freak," she said. Then she pointed at both of them. "Freaks!"

"Oh lands," mumbled Fiddleford, trying not to laugh.

El held up a hand. "High six."

"Oh my gosh, Ford," Stan started laughing. "At least you taught her *something* good."

Fiddleford raised his hand and El tapped it with her own, beaming. He grinned at her, then looked up at the others. "Welp. I think it's high time for supper. C'mon, El, you can tell us more about your day as we're workin'."

That night, after El had fallen asleep, the three men held council in the living room.

"The kid has superpowers?!" Stan said as soon as they were assembled.

"Well, telekinesis," said Ford.

"Don't get all sciency on me!" said Stan. "She can move stuff with her mind!"

"Which is exactly what telekinesis is," muttered Ford. "And I feel I have a right to say that I was right and this means she is some sort of anomaly."

"Yeah, but kids don't just appear out of thin air," said Stan. "Where'd she come from?"

"Hawkins Nuclear Power Plant and Research Facility."

The brothers turned to look at Fiddleford, who had been flicking through a folder full of papers. He held one up, a dark expression on his face.

"What do you mean?" Ford asked, frowning.

"I mean that's where El came from," said Fiddleford. "It makes sense. The building's in the woods, a good ways outside Gravity Falls, close to the river, if I recall. We investigated it a little, not long after I got here, remember?" he looked down at the paper with a scowl on his face. "Never could figure out what they was doin' in there, but it sure as heck wasn't runnin' a nuclear facility."

"So you think that they, what, made a little kid in their lab?" said Stan.

"Kidnapped her is more likely," said Fiddleford, his hands tightening around the paper and crumpling it.

"And they've been experimenting on her," said Ford, softly. "That's why she was frightened of me. She thought we would, I

would-" his face paled, and he braced himself on the back of an armchair.

"Well that's horrible," said Stan. "So when do we get to go punch those guys? I mean, I'm assuming we're gonna go make their lives Hell since they messed with our kid."

"Oh we *definitely* are," growled Fiddleford.

"We need to find out more about the facility," said Ford. "If we do this right it's possible we can get enough evidence to have them put in jail."

"We're gonna need to get inside the building to do that," said Stan. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I could do that, but it might be better to just con 'em into letting us inside."

Ford snorted. "Using what? Your traveling salesman disguise?"

Stan rolled his eyes. "No, I was thinkin' of you two. You're nerds, you could come up with a sciency reason to get in there."

"He's got a point," said Fiddleford. "We'd need to know who's in charge of the place, maybe we could be lookin' into their research?"

Ford straightened and snapped his fingers. "West Coast Tech. We could pretend to from West Coast Tech, investigating their nuclear technology and research."

"And while you're inside you take a good look around and get the layout and then later we go back there and bam!" Stan smacked his hands together. "Wreck the place."

The next day Ford and Fiddleford went to the library to do research on Hawkins Nuclear Power Plant and Research Facility. Stan stayed home with Eleven telling them, "I ain't gonna sit in a stuffy library all day and somebody's gotta watch the kid."

What they found was disturbing, to say the least.

"It says here," said Fiddleford, straightening his glasses. "The place was started by a Dr. Martin Brenner. He's been running experiments and working there for at least fifteen years."

“Here,” Ford held up a picture of a group of people in hospital gowns standing around a tall man in a suit. “I believe that’s him. From what I gather he mostly did experiments with psychoactive drugs, nothing too strange for the 70’s.”

Fiddleford frowned and pulled out a newspaper. “What about this? Says here a woman named Terry Ives accused him of malpractice and-” he paused, eyes wide.

“What?” Ford looked up, frowning.

“And *stealing her daughter*,” said Fiddleford, quietly.

“Oh,” said Ford. “Oh.”

“Never found any evidence,” said Fiddleford, throwing down the paper as if it was personally responsible for this. “Says somethin’ about her goin’ crazy too.”

Ford took a deep breath and glanced at the paper. “The date lines up with Eleven’s age.” He looked up at Fiddleford. “I guess I know who we need to talk to at the lab.”

Fiddleford nodded. “Yeah. *Talk*.” He glanced out the window and frowned. “Uh, Ford, speakin’ of Hawkins lab, we got company.”

“What?” Ford hurried over to the window.

Outside two white vans could be seen. One was parked in the lot of the grocery store and the other outside a row of shops. Even as Ford watched a third van drove up the street and turned towards the library. Ford resisted the urge to spring back as it drove by.

“I think it’s time we were going,” he said.

Notes for the Chapter:

I thought it would be clever to merge Hawkins Lab with the nuclear facility Ford and Stan steal waste from to power the portal in the show. It seemed like the kind of cover the lab would be using.

5. A Monster Lurks

Notes for the Chapter:

Time to introduce another very important character.
:)))

“So this Dr. Brenner’s the one responsible for messing up Eleven?”

“Yes.”

“Well at least I know who to punch now.”

It was that evening and Ford and Fiddleford were filling Stan in on what they had learned from their research. They had also mentioned the appearance of the strange vans from the lab.

“You think they could be onto us?” Fiddleford asked.

“Nah, if they were they’d already be here,” said Stan, shrugging. “More likely they were just scoping stuff out. They know the kid’s escaped, it makes sense for her to hide somewhere in town. Lucky for us my brother is incredibly weird and built his house in the middle of the woods.”

“For the last time, it was to better study the flora and fauna of the valley,” grumbled Ford.

Stan waved a hand. “Whatever. So now you two just gotta set up some sort of science appointment with this Dr. Brenner guy.”

“Should we tell Eleven what we’re doing?” Ford asked, frowning.

“We should try to be honest with her,” said Fiddleford.

“But we might also scare her if she finds out you two are going to the lab to talk to a guy whose held her captive her whole life,” Stan said. “We can always tell her when you guys get back.”

“I don’t know,” said Fiddleford, frowning.

“If we do scare her she may run off,” Ford pointed out. “It would be better to wait.”

Fiddleford sighed. “Fine. I guess we’d better call the lab in the morning then.”

“Remind me again why I keep letting you two drag me off on adventures?”

Stan grinned back at Fiddleford, who was looking nervously at the forest around them. “Aw, you just pretend we drag you, you like our hikes through the woods.”

“Hikes through the woods are fine,” Fiddleford grumbled. “It’s the monsters I can’t abide by.”

Ford, Stan, Fiddleford and Eleven were trekking through the forest, stopping at various points to check Ford’s research equipment. Ford and Fiddleford’s reconnaissance mission at the lab wasn’t for another two days and both men were on edge. Stan had finally declared he was tired of them pacing around the house and occasionally, accidentally, setting things on fire, and had dragged them all outside. Eleven, who was oblivious to the source of the men’s worry but knew something was going on, had been excited to go with them on an “adventure”.

She trekked along with them now gamely. It had been almost two weeks since they’d found her and she already looked like a far cry from the terrified little girl she’d been. She held Fiddleford’s hand and looked around the woods, her sharp eyes taking everything in. She smiled at Stan’s jokes and let Ford explain how his equipment and traps in the forest worked. It also didn’t hurt that she was properly dressed now in jeans, sneakers, a sweater and a coat. They had even found her a knitted cap to wear. All in all she looked much more like a quiet, curious little girl and less like a lost lab experiment.

They had been wandering in the woods for about an hour when she suddenly froze.

Eleven felt a small tug on her arm for a moment as Fiddleford continued to walk forward without her, then he turned back,

frowning.

“What’s wrong El?” he asked.

She shook her head, eyes wide and darting around the trees, ears straining for any kind of noise besides the wind.

The birds had gone quiet. The whole forest had gone quiet. And just at the edge of her senses El could swear she smelled something rotten.

Her heart pounded and she looked up at Fiddleford with terror in her eyes. “Hide,” she said quietly, urgently.

“Hide from what?” he asked, kneeling down in front of her.

She shook her head quickly and grabbed one of his hands, tugging on it. “Monster. Hide *now*.”

“What’s going on?” Stan asked, walking over.

El could see her own fear reflected in Fiddleford’s eyes before he looked away. “El says there’s a monster nearby.”

“A monster?” said Ford, suddenly alert.

They didn’t have time for this. The smell of rot was coming closer and everything was too quiet, too still. “*Hide!*” she said, trying to funnel all her terror into the word.

Stan moved. He jerked Fiddleford up and kept hold of his arm, then grabbed Ford and dragged his brother away from his scrutiny of the forest. “Fidds, keep hold of the kid,” he said, already pulling them further into the trees.

El squeezed Fiddleford’s hand. He squeezed hers back just as tight. They weren’t quite running, but they were moving fast.

“Stanley I *can* walk on my own you know,” said Ford, sounding annoyed.

“I’m just makin’ sure you don’t walk in the wrong direction, Pointdexter,” said Stan. “Now shut up an’ stay quiet, would ya?”

Stan dragged them down behind the rim that rose up over a creek bed and shoved them into the bushes. El could just see through the branches to the trail they’d left. She dug the fingers of her empty

hand into the dirt and forced herself to breathe normally. Her whole body was tense and she felt like she might be sick.

The forest was still. No birds or animals moved, even the wind had faded away. El held her breath.

Then, movement.

A large, gray shape strode through the trees near the path they had been on. It looked almost like a man, except the proportions were all wrong. The arms and legs were too long and...

And it didn't have a face.

El bit her tongue to keep from making noise as she watched it stop and lift its head to sniff the air. She felt Fiddleford squeeze her hand and heard Stan take a sharp breath.

'No no no no no,' she pleaded silently. 'Go away. Please go away. Please please please...'

The creature turned in their direction and El didn't dare to breathe.

'Please please please please...'

It turned away, head swinging towards a new noise or scent, and loped off through the forest in pursuit of it.

El took a breath and it turned into a sob. Someone wrapped an arm around her and she curled into them, shaking.

"Ford, get back here!"

Stan let go of Eleven and nudged her towards Fiddleford, whose frozen, shell-shocked expression finally broke as the little girl bumped into him. Then Stan was hurrying after his brother, grabbing his shoulder and yanking him back.

“Whaddya think you’re doing?!” he yelled in the loudest whisper he dared, shaking Ford.

“I have a theory,” said Ford, infuriatingly calm.

“Is it that if you go back out there that thing’s gonna eat you? Because that’s the only thing that’s gonna happen!” growled Stan.

“It’s long gone by now, Stan, you saw how fast it was moving,” Ford reasoned.

“Yeah, and we don’t know it wasn’t circling back for us,” snapped Stan.

“Just let me check this one thing and then we can cower in the woods for as long as you’d like,” said Ford, wrenching his arm out of Stan’s grip and hurrying towards the trail.

Stan cursed and followed him, looking around warily. Ford paused beside the trail, crouching down to look at the ground.

“Fascinating,” Ford muttered.

“What?” Stan hissed.

“These tracks,” said Ford. “It’s as I suspected. That creature is the same one we were tracking the night we found Eleven!” he looked up at Stan, grinning like this was some great breakthrough instead of a thinly veiled suicide attempt.

“That’s great, Ford, now can we go?” said Stan, impatiently.

Ford’s grin vanished and he stood, brushing himself off and looking annoyed. “I told you, the creature is very likely gone, we’re perfectly safe.”

“Fine. Go tell them that then,” Stan said, gesturing at Fiddleford and El, who were nervously crouched down behind a bush where Stan had left them, watching.

Ford looked where he was pointing and the frustration on his face faded. “Oh,” he said, suddenly sounding contrite.

“Yeah,” Stan, sighed.

Notes for the Chapter:

What would we do without Stan?

If you guessed that the creature in chapter one was

the demogorgon then congrats! have a cookie :)

6. Blanket Fort

Notes for the Chapter:

Another short chapter but it is filled with fluff. It is. so soft. Just look at the title.

There will be angst and terrible things happening later, so enjoy it while it lasts. :)

They sat in the living room until Stan called that supper was ready. Ford was running around, he wouldn't stop moving, he looked like a blur. Fiddleford wouldn't let go of her. She didn't mind.

She didn't taste what she was eating, but she ate it anyway. Ford talked, she didn't try to hear what he was saying. When she finished her food she sat quietly, head down.

Fiddleford took her upstairs and helped her put on pajamas. She sat on her bed and stared at the wall.

'My fault my fault my fault my fault...'

She could see the monster in her mind, in the other place, the way it had been when she'd found it. She could hear her screams as the walls between worlds ripped around her and the creature roared and let me out let me out let me out-

She started at a touch on her shoulder and a soft voice called, "El? What's wrong?"

She blinked and saw Fiddleford kneeling in front of her, frowning. She struggled with the words, trying to find the right ones, but it was too hard. She shook her head and looked down.

"You still scared about what happened in the forest?"

She nodded. It was easier than explaining.

"It's okay. I was scared too. Probably ain't gonna sleep well tonight."

She could hear him smiling. It was a funny thing, both that he was smiling and that she could hear it. She looked up at him again. It was a not-really-real smile. She tried to give one back but she felt tears in her eyes instead.

“Aw, El,” the smile fell off his face. “It’s okay. There’s nothin’ than can get us in here. We’re safe.”

The tears dripped from her eyes and she shook her head. They weren’t safe. Maybe they’d never be safe.

She felt arms wrap around her and she hugged back, taking comfort in being able to hold on to something. She felt one of Fiddleford’s hands rub up and down her back.

They sat like that for a while. Her tears were gone when Fiddleford spoke again.

“Hey, I got an idea,” he pulled back and gave her a real smile. “You ever build a blanket fort before?”

El shook her head. He smiled wider.

“Well high time y’do then,” he said. He stood, and she stood with him, keeping her arms wrapped around one of his as he led her downstairs.

“Hey, Stan!” Fiddleford called as they paused on the second floor.

Stan peeked out of a doorway. “What’s up?”

“Y’wanna build a blanket fort with me an’ El? Figure if we all get in on it we can drag Stanford into it too.”

Stan gave the biggest grin she’d ever seen. “Sounds good to me. Lemme grab my pillows.”

They went to the living room. Stan yanked the couch apart and El’s eyes widened. He pulled big pillows out of it and tossed them onto the floor, setting normal pillows around them.

Fiddleford let go of her and she whimpered, trying to hold onto him. He squeezed her hand and smiled. “I’ll be right back, El,” he said, quietly.

El stood with her arms wrapped around herself, suddenly

cold.

“Hey kid, why don’t ya help me get some blankets out?”

She looked up at Stan standing next to her and wrapped her arms around him. He grinned and patted her head.

“C’mon, kid,” he said, and led her to a little closet-in-the-wall. She froze at the sight of it, and almost ran, but Stan only opened it and pulled out blankets, handing her a few. Then they went back to the living room.

Fiddleford was setting up sticks, humming as he did so. She carried her blankets over to him.

“Alright, El,” he said, smiling as he finished with the sticks. “Jus’ start throwin’ blankets over these poles here any way y’like.”

She frowned. Cautiously she set the blankets down and pulled one out of the pile, setting it carefully on the sticks. She looked up at Fiddleford uncertainly.

“Good job,” he said, nodding. He picked up another blanket and threw it over the sticks. “Jus’ keep doin’ that till the whole thing’s covered.”

While she and Fiddleford put the blankets on the sticks, Stan left and came back with more pillows and blankets. He crawled under the blankets and started arranging things inside. He saw her watching him and waved her inside.

She crawled in with him and watched. He showed her how to set up the pillows around the edges of the blankets, and she helped him lay the blankets over them.

When they were done, she and Stan crawled back out. Fiddleford stood looking very happy as he stared at what they’d made.

“Blanket fort?” she asked uncertainly.

“And a mighty fine one, if I do say so myself,” said Fiddleford.

Stan nodded. “Y’know, most of the time you and my brother being all sciency is just annoying, but I gotta say, it pays to have an engineer when you’re making a blanket fort.”

Fiddleford laughed. El wasn’t sure what an “engineer” was, but she smiled a little. She liked it when they were happy.

"Alright," said Stan. "I'm gonna go drag Ford into this thing. You two get settled."

El climbed back into the fort with Fiddleford. She liked it. It was warm and soft and felt safe. She snuggled against Fiddleford and he pulled a blanket over her, then leaned back against the pillows.

She heard grumbling, and then saw Stan and Ford's feet walk into the room.

"I can't believe you built a blanket fort, Stanley."

"Hey, it was the nerd's idea, and he did it for the kid."

"Well it's very nice. I'm going back to work now."

"Oh no y'don't. Stanford Pines you get into that blanket fort *or else.*"

"C'mon, Ford," Fiddleford called. "It'll be like college!"

Ford made a funny noise and Stan started laughing.

"You made blanket forts in college?!"

"They were Fiddleford's idea! I just, sometimes I, I was tired!"

"It was usually after he hadn't slept for two days," said Fiddleford. "I'd build one in our room and drag him into it. He helped me build one once."

Ford made another funny noise. El smiled a little and crept to the fort entrance.

"Ford?" she said softly.

He turned to her, eyebrows together in a not-quite-angry face. Gazed up at him with wide, brown eyes and held out a hand to him.

"Please?"

Ford melted. His eyebrows went back to normal and he slumped, sighing. He took her hand and she gave him a little tug, pulling him inside.

Stan crawled in after Ford and it was very warm and cozy now. El snuggled in the middle of them all. She felt better.

She felt safe.

“Blanket forts good,” she mumbled softly. She heard Stan laugh and say something to Ford but didn’t bother to understand it. She curled up in the blankets and the pillows with *good* men around her.

And she fell asleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

In my sophomore year of college my roommate and I built the BEST blanket fort in our apartment, so Fidds and Ford's blanket fort adventures were inspired by that. Also I always thought it was really cute that in Stranger Things the boys made El a blanket fort to sleep in in Mike's basement.

7. The Secret of Hawkins Lab

Summary for the Chapter:

His blood went cold and his heart skipped. There, set into one wall, was a gaping hole from which the vines were spreading. It looked like the maw of a monster, and it seemed to radiate cold, despair and... and something else. Evil wasn't quite the right word.

Poison. That was it.

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, here we go, things start to get moving now. This chapter's longer, to make up for the short ones, I guess. xD

Disclaimer: It's been a few years since I watched season 1 of Stranger Things and I can't remember that much about the layout of the lab/the details of it. However, writing this fic made me realize that I never actually bought season 1 (despite it being my favorite) so I ordered it. So if you suddenly notice a spike in the accuracy of my descriptions you know what happened. xD

“Good morning, gentlemen.”

Ford and Fiddleford stood inside Hawkins Nuclear Power Plant and Research Facility. Their forged West Coast Tech ID's (courtesy of Stan) had passed muster, and for the past several minutes they had been waiting in a stark-looking lobby with large windows on each wall to let in the light.

They turned and saw the man who had spoken. He was tall, with neatly combed white hair and a hawkish face. They knew who he was immediately, and both managed not to let their disgust show.

"My name is Dr. Martin Brenner," said the man.

"Pleased to meet you," said Ford, as smoothly as he could. "My name is Dr. Dan Williams, and this is my colleague, Dr. Frazier."

"How do you do?" said Fiddleford, only a little stiffly.

Stan had assured them that they needed fake names. Not knowing enough about breaking into secret labs to argue, Ford and Fiddleford had agreed to it- especially because their names (particularly Fiddleford's) were not very common.

With the pleasantries blessedly over with, the two men followed Brenner further into the lab.

"We're very privileged to have visitors from such an esteemed college in our humble lab," said Brenner. "I'll give you the grand tour, which should give you a good idea of what we do here."

'We know what you do here,' Ford thought, trying not to look annoyed. Brenner's pleasantness was going to drive him mad, he was sure of it.

They walked through hallways and into rooms filled with various types of equipment and Ford tried to force himself to listen to what Brenner was saying about his work. He glanced back once and saw Fiddleford trying to keep his face as neutral as possible. Ford found himself glad that it wasn't just his tendency for social ineptitude that was making this hard.

Ford focused on memorizing the route and storing away any useful information Brenner happened to say (there wasn't much of it, the man was as good a liar as Stanley ever was). He made a few comments, asked a couple questions, and generally tried to seem like he was interested. Fiddleford did at first too- in fact, to Ford's intense relief, his friend seemed perfectly willing to talk to Brenner and come up with pertinent questions.

As they kept going, however (the lab was enormous, and each level held a different façade to unravel) Ford realized that it had been a while since he'd heard Fiddleford say anything. He turned around to see what was bothering him-

-And saw that Fiddleford was gone.

His heart pounded. Was someone on to them? Had they dragged Fiddleford away without him noticing?

Then he remembered that their plan was to slip away and investigate the lab on their own. But he had been under the impression that they would do it together, so why had Fiddleford wandered off? And not only that, but wandered off and left him alone to deal with Brenner and cover for his friend?

Ford suppressed a huff of annoyance and forced himself to pay attention again. Whatever had caught Fiddleford's attention, it had better be important.

Brenner had just started taking them down a new hallway when Fiddleford noticed something strange. There was a door ajar. They had gone into dozens of rooms by now, and all of them had been locked and had to be opened by a special key code. This door must not have latched properly and never re-locked itself.

Deciding he wouldn't get another chance like this, Fiddleford hung back as Ford and Brenner kept walking. He only needed a minute, he could catch up to them easily.

After checking the hall for cameras and making sure no one was watching, Fiddleford slipped into the room.

He had expected to find some sort of office or maybe supply cupboard, so when he turned around and saw what the room actually contained, he froze.

The room was stark and white, with no windows or adornments. It was no bigger than an office. In the middle, against one wall, was a small bed with a nightstand beside it. On the bed was one single blanket and one single stuffed animal.

Fiddleford went cold, and for a few moments all he could do was stare at the sight before him. Then, slowly, he walked forward. He ran his hands over the blanket and found it thin and scratchy. The

stuffed animal was a lion, and he liked it simply because it looked worn and used, unlike the rest of the room.

But the most disturbing thing was the paper on the nightstand. It was a simple stick-figure drawing of a child and a man labeled, “11” and “papa”, in a child’s rough handwriting.

Fiddleford pressed a hand over his mouth and took a shuddering breath. Eleven’s room. He had found Eleven’s room. The room where the sweet little girl they’d come to love had spent most of her ten years of life.

He stumbled back and suddenly couldn’t stand to be in the room anymore. He hurried out, leaving the door open just a little behind him again and leaned against the wall beside it, fighting to control his breathing. He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his hands into fists.

Finally, he took a deep breath and opened his eyes, leaning away from the wall. He looked up and down the hallway...

...and realized that he had no idea where Ford and Brenner had gone.

He sighed. Well, nothing for it then. He started walking in the direction Ford and Brenner had been headed and hoped he’d run into them. As an afterthought, he clipped his visitor’s badge to the bottom of his shirt so it’d be less noticeable. He didn’t think he’d run into any trouble, but hopefully anyone who saw him would think he was just another employee in this awful place.

At the end of the hall he came to a fork in his path and paused for a second, then shrugged slightly and took the left hallway. He started to see more people walking by, all in labcoats. He grabbed one lying on a table as he walked past and shrugged it on. No one gave him so much as a second glance after that.

He took note of the workers and scientists, but none of them seemed to be doing anything terribly strange. More doors were open on this route, and he could see men and women inside, taking notes and examining machinery. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Then, he walked through a pair of double doors and abruptly the busyness around him vanished. He kept walking but saw no sign of anyone else in the corridors.

Even more peculiar was the fact that along here the lights were dimmed, like this part of the lab was running on low power. Fiddleford found himself getting more curious by the minute as to what they could be hiding down here, in the dark.

Eventually he came to an elevator door marked with yellow caution tape. He frowned, squinting at it in the weak light. The keypad seemed to still be intact, and unless they completely cut power to this part of the building it should still be operating.

What were they hiding? Weapons? Spy equipment?

... More children?

It was the last thought that made Fiddleford step forward and hit the control button. If there were more kids like Eleven (and she was number eleven, so it was entirely possible) in here then they needed to know so they could get them out. The elevator creaked, then eased itself open.

Fiddleford took a deep breath and stepped inside, pressing the down button. If anything was hidden in this place, it was likely to be underground.

The light in the elevator was just dim as the hallway had been, but as Fiddleford looked around the inside of it he noticed a number of dark smudges and streaks on the walls. His breath hitched a little and he squeezed his hands together.

'It ain't blood,' he told himself. 'Maybe it's just mud or coffee that somebody, y'know, threw on the walls for some reason. Yeah. Definitely not blood.'

Willing himself not to look at the suspicious stains, Fiddleford focused on the elevator door. It seemed to be taking an awfully long time to get down to the next floor.

Finally the elevator shuddered to a stop and the doors pulled

open. Fiddleford had just started to step out when his eyes adjusted to the dark hallway ahead.

He froze. The hallway was dark, but not totally, like it would be when the lights were out. Instead it glowed with a pale, ethereal light that illuminated just enough of the walls, floor and ceiling to make Fiddleford want to run back into the bloodstained elevator screaming.

There was more blood on the floor, long streaks of it that stretched down the hallway. Floating in the air were white specks that looked almost like snow, though after a moment Fiddleford decided ash was a better comparison. The snow, or ash, floated without really falling to the ground like it ought to, adding to the spectral appearance of the hall. Along the walls were black tendrils that looked, at first glance, like vines. As Fiddleford shakily crept closer to examine them, however, he realized they were covered in slime and looked more like the tentacles of some massive, creeping beast.

Fiddleford stumbled back and clutched the door of the elevator, breathing far too quickly. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to take a deep breath, but it turned into a ragged gasp. He swallowed hard and looked out at the dark hallway again.

He should never have come down here. He ought to have turned around the moment he knew he was going the wrong way and tried to find Ford. But he had been focused on trying to look inconspicuous and hoping to find more information about Eleven and he had never thought, he had never believed that *this* was what the lab was hiding.

But now he was here, and he knew for a fact that nothing short of a life-or-death emergency would get him down in this dungeon of horror again. If he went back upstairs and told Ford he'd found a terrifying secret hallway, Ford would insist on having details or, even worse, insist on seeing it for himself. Wouldn't it just be better to brave whatever might be lurking down here than to have to face the dread of coming back a second time?

There was also the fact that he didn't know if they could

manage to sneak down here again. He wasn't sure how long he had been gone but it was long enough to arouse suspicion and Ford wasn't a very good liar. This might be the only chance they had to snoop around in the lab before they came back to end things. And if that was the case then they needed to know all they could about what was going on here.

But what if whatever monster had caused the bloodstains was still down here, waiting in the dark? He didn't even have a weapon! Or a flashlight! Surely even Ford couldn't argue too much against that logic.

Then he thought of Eleven. What if all this was some sort of front to hide information about her? What if the monster was guarding other children held captive down here?

Fiddleford steeled himself. He had to go on. He had to make certain they knew what was down here in case it had something to do with Eleven. He was wasting time.

He took a deep breath and released his hold on the elevator door. Slowly, cautiously, he stepped away from the now-comforting light the elevator provided, and started making his way down the nightmarish hallway.

Ford wasn't sure if he was angry or worried. Both, he decided after a moment of thought.

Fiddleford had not yet reappeared. It had been at least half an hour since Ford noticed him missing. Brenner had noticed Fiddleford's disappearance as well and questioned it. Ford had brushed it off by saying Fiddleford had probably gotten distracted by some of the technology in the lab and forgotten what he was doing. He tried to present it in the same calm, collected way Stanley always lied, but he wasn't sure how well he did.

Brenner seemed to buy it though. He had laughed and said

they'd find Fiddleford on their way back.

Ford wasn't sure how much longer he could keep this up. Brenner had taken him into an office and they were now discussing the various benefits of the lab and West Coast Tech working together. Ford had a vague idea of how these sorts of things worked but he was making up most of what he said. Brenner didn't seem suspicious, but Ford had a hard enough time reading other people when he wasn't anxious about his friends disappearing.

His impression of Brenner hadn't improved. The man was an excellent liar, Ford decided. Ford had brought up human experimentation once, referencing Brenner's stint with using psychoactive drugs on volunteers. Brenner had shrugged, given him an obviously fake smile, and said, "Well we all did stupid things in the 70's." Ford had faked a laugh and hadn't dared to bring it up again for fear of arousing the man's suspicions.

Ford hoped he didn't seem nervous. He could feel his hands sweating, but he took care to keep his face calm and neutral. He decided he would much rather be facing down a monster than stuck in a room for ten more minutes trying to lie to Brenner's face. Unfortunately until Fiddleford came back he had to stall for time.

Which led him back to the worried thought circling around and around in his head:

'Fiddleford where are you?'

Fiddleford would much rather have been upstairs trying to lie to Brenner's face than stumbling down a hallway that stank of rot and death that looked straight out of a horror movie. The further he went the harder it became to breathe, but he couldn't tell if it was from the stench, his anxiety or the weird particles floating around. Probably all three, he decided.

He didn't dare put his hand out to touch the wall. He had

absolutely no desire to touch the tentacle-vines. It was hard to see them, but he was pretty sure they were getting thicker the further he went.

He kept walking. At first he thought it was silent, but gradually he became aware of another noise. At first he thought it was the thrum of some massive engine, but then, with dawning horror, he realized it sounded like breathing.

He almost turned back then, and as it was he had to stand still and force himself to breathe normally for a couple of minutes until his heart rate leveled out again. He listened. The breathing didn't seem to be getting any closer- or further away- so whatever it was was likely stationary. Which wasn't exactly comforting, but at least it wasn't moving towards him. He thought of Eleven and forced himself to keep going.

After what could have been anything from a few minutes to a few hours, Fiddleford realized it was getting lighter. He walked slower and focused on it, trying to figure out what it was.

Unfortunately that meant that he didn't notice the vines were no longer just on the walls.

His foot caught and he tripped. His hands and knees slammed painfully into the ground and he gasped.

Then he saw what he had tripped over.

With an involuntary little cry, Fiddleford jerked up and stumbled back, breathing hard. The vines crisscrossed over the ground now, oozing slime and little tendrils. There was some on his hands and he quickly wiped it off onto the labcoat.

'This is insane,' he thought. *'What is this place?'*

Shakily he stepped between the vines on the ground, fighting every instinct in him that was screaming to run.

He was so on edge that he nearly screamed when he heard voices.

They were muffled, but as he listened he realized they were human. He dared to walk a little faster, hoping desperately to come across other people down here. Even if they locked him away somewhere it would be better than this nightmare.

Suddenly the hall opened up into a large room, much better lit than the tunnel had been. Fiddleford blinked. The light looked hazy and red and he wasn't sure he liked it better.

There was a slightly-raised platform beside him, with tentacle-vines starting to crawl up the base of it. Fiddleford shuddered. It was from here that the voices were coming, and if he squinted he could see people moving around in it.

Then he looked ahead.

His blood went cold and his heart skipped. There, set into one wall, was a gaping hole from which the vines were spreading. It looked like the maw of a monster, and it seemed to radiate cold, despair and... and something else. Evil wasn't quite the right word.

Poison. That was it.

Fiddleford ran. He turned and hurtled back down the hallway, gasping, not caring if he breathed in the rot and the stench. He didn't stop running until he reached the elevator. There he frantically pushed the button until the doors opened. He dashed inside and pressed up as fast as he could.

As the elevator began to move, Fiddleford sank to the floor and hugged his knees to his chest, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried desperately to rid his mind of whatever horrible nightmare that place was.

But the image of the maw in the wall remained in his mind, haunting him.

Questions flew through his mind. What was it? Why was it in the lab? How did all of this connect to Eleven?

The elevator slid to a stop. Fiddleford crawled out of it and huddled against a wall outside, taking deep, shuddering gulps of

clean air.

He didn't know what was going on.

But he wanted to forget it.

Notes for the Chapter:

Fun fact! The fake names Ford and Fiddleford use in this chapter are names of two of my old college professors.

I thought it would be interesting to have a chapter where Ford and Fidds both really, really wanted to be in the situation the other person was in, instead of the one they ended up stuck in.

And of course I have to traumatize Fiddleford. Because I love him. xD

8. Back at the Shack

Summary for the Chapter:

El's hands dropped to her sides. Stan patted her head and grinned.

"Okay," he said. "Now I'm gonna teach you how to punch stuff."

Notes for the Chapter:

And now have a brief interlude to break up the tension.

Eleven was sitting at the kitchen table, coloring, when Stan walked in. She glanced up, then looked back at her picture.

"Hey kid."

"Hey Stan," she said, trying to mimic his tone.

"I got somethin' I wanna show you how to do," Stan continued.

El looked up at him again and tilted her head. "Okay," she said after a moment. She walked over to him.

"Get your coat, we're goin' outside," said Stan, already heading for the door. Eleven did as he said and followed him out.

"Alright, kid," said Stan. He was standing in the middle of the yard next to a small jumble of equipment she didn't understand. "I'm gonna teach you some self-defense."

"What's self-defense?" she asked.

"It's what ya do when somebody attacks you," said Stan. "Now I know you got your powers and all that, but this stuff can still be useful to you. Like say you couldn't use your tele-whatever-it-is and somebody tried to hurt you. You gotta be able to fight back. Okay?"

El nodded. Stan leaned down and picked a red piece of plastic with a band on the back off the ground and attached it to his hand.

"Alright," said Stan. "Make a fist, like this," he showed her with his other hand. "And hit this thing as hard as y'can. This ain't trainin' yet, I just wanna get an idea of how strong you are."

El frowned, staring at the plastic thing, then looked up hesitantly at Stan.

He grinned at her. "It's okay, it's just a foam pad. It ain't gonna bite you."

El took a deep breath and nodded. She lifted her hand, made a fist, and hit the pad as hard as she could.

She was surprised that it wasn't hard, like she'd expected. It wasn't exactly soft, either, but it didn't hurt when she hit it. She stumbled a little and looked up at Stan.

"Not bad," he said. "Alright, so your first problem is that you're smaller than anybody you're gonna have to fight. Ain't your fault, but it's true. So, you gotta learn how to knock people down. Good place to start is stompin' somebody's toes and hittin' 'em in the groin. If they got you from behind then send your elbow into their stomach as hard as y'can. Once they keel over, hit 'em in the head. But not like how you punched this thing earlier, I'm gonna show you how to hit in a minute. Another good thing to remember is if you grab somebody's ears or the sides of their head they- well, y'know what? Here, kid, grab my ears."

El laughed. "What?"

Stan rolled his eyes and bent over, hands on his knees. "Grab my ears, you'll understand in a minute." El shrugged and did as he said.

"Okay, now *gently*, because I'm just your instructor and not actually tryin' to hurt you, drag my head to the left."

El pulled and Stan staggered, laughing. El's eyes widened.

"There, y'see? You drag somebody's head around and the rest of their body's gonna follow. Oh, you can let go now, kid."

El's hands dropped to her sides. Stan patted her head and grinned.

"Okay," he said. "Now I'm gonna teach you how to punch stuff."

Punching stuff was fun, El decided. Stan also taught her how to fight with her knees, elbows, and to slam the palm of her hand into someone's nose to break it.

"And remember," Stan had said, as they were going over weak points humans had. "It only takes five pounds of pressure to rip off somebody's ear."

El blinked. "What?"

"If you wanna rip somebody's ear off just give it a good yank. It'll come right off. Then, not only are you leavin' your attacker screamin' in pain, you also have a DNA sample to give to the cops. That is, if the fight you were just in is legal. Otherwise, don't give it to the cops. Then you got a souvenir!" Stan paused, then, "Don't tell Ford and Fidds I told you that part."

She was tired now, but happy. She liked learning from Stan. He didn't make her do anything that hurt and he told her when she did good and didn't lock her up when she did something wrong. He just corrected whatever she was doing and told her to try again. She liked it much better than learning at the bad place.

She was excited to tell Ford and Fiddleford about what she'd learned (except for ripping people's ears off for souvenirs) and she was coloring again, trying to stay awake until they got back from wherever they'd gone. She yawned. She shouldn't be this tired, she hadn't even used her powers.

She yawned again and rubbed her eyes. Maybe she could sit on the couch and wait for them there. That way if she fell asleep she'd still hear them come in.

She was asleep minutes after she curled up in a corner of the couch. And she didn't even stir when Stan found her a short while later and carried her up to bed.

Ford and Brenner were headed back towards the lobby when they ran into Fiddleford.

Ford had stalled for as long as he could, but he knew he wasn't any good at making small talk. He had anxiously watched for Fiddleford as they made their way back through the lab, getting more and more nervous as they went along. If Fiddleford didn't appear soon he would blow their cover for sure.

Then, all of a sudden, he was there, and they quite nearly ran into him as they turned a corner.

"Ah, there you are, Dr. Fraizer," said Brenner. "We were wondering where you'd got to."

Fiddleford nodded. "Afraid I got a bit distracted with some of the things in your fine facility here, Dr. Brenner," he said, quietly. Ford breathed a sigh of relief when Fiddleford's story matched his own.

"Well, you're welcome to come visit again if you so desire," said Brenner. "Such esteemed company is always welcome."

"I think I've seen enough," said Fiddleford, giving what even Ford could tell was a forced smile.

Brenner didn't seem to notice. Either the man was more oblivious about social cues than Ford was or he was playing them. Ford sincerely hoped it was the former.

They said farewell to Brenner at the doors of the lab (or rather Ford did, Fiddleford was strangely quiet) and made their way back to Fiddleford's car (Stan's would have been too obvious, and thanks to the local tree monster Ford didn't have one). Fiddleford, however, went around to the passenger side and climbed in. Ford shrugged and climbed into the driver's seat.

Ford waited until they had passed the gate of the lab and were making their way back along the forest road to start shouting.

"Where in the world did you disappear to?!" he began, with absolutely no warning. "You left me alone with Brenner for an hour at least! I was terrified I was about to blow our cover! For all I know I did and he's tracking us or something! You didn't even tell me you were leaving, you just vanished and I had to cover for you! I thought we were going to go investigating together, how could you, why would you-" Ford huffed, clenching the steering wheel. "Did you at least find something that could be useful to us?"

He looked over and suddenly frowned. Fiddleford remained quiet, head bowed. His hands were clenched into fists. Ford was suddenly aware of how shaky his friend's breathing was and a faint smell like rotting plants.

"Fiddleford?" he ventured, his voice quieter and unsure now. "Are you-are you alright?"

Fiddleford didn't reply at first, and when he finally did his voice was quiet and unsteady.

"There is somethin' *evil* in that lab, Stanford."

Ford knew instinctively that he didn't mean Brenner or even the experiments the lab had done on Eleven, but that gave him more questions than answers. "What do you mean?"

"I-I went down to the basement," said Fiddleford. "Found it by accident. I figured if I didn't investigate you'd have to drag us down there later to so I-I might as well..."

Ford risked another glance at his friend. Fiddleford had wrapped his arms around himself and he seemed to be trying to make himself as small as possible. Ford frowned. He hadn't seen Fiddleford this shaken since the gremloblin attack. Even the sighting of the unknown monster a few days ago hadn't bothered him anywhere near this much.

"I ain't gonna say more," said Fiddleford. "Not till we get home. I-I only wanna have to tell this once. An' then I don't ever wanna have to think about it again."

"Alright," said Ford, softly.

Shame suddenly descended on him. As uncomfortable as his time stuck alone with Brenner had been it had been, at worst, nothing more than frustrating. Whatever Fiddleford had found had obviously traumatized him greatly, and Ford had yelled at him without even giving him a chance to explain.

"Fiddleford I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled before," he said.

"S-s'all right," Fiddleford said, and when Ford looked over Fiddleford gave him a pained smile. "I shouldn't've wandered off. Was a bad idea for all sorts a'reasons I see now."

There was a long pause.

Then,

"I found Eleven's room."

Ford looked over sharply. "What?"

Fiddleford glanced at him and nodded. "That's what distracted me. It, Stanford it wasn't even a proper room, it was all white an' cold an' awful an' they didn't even give 'er a proper blanket and alls she had was one stuffed animal."

Ford felt a pang in his heart. "Oh," he managed.

"When I came back out y'all had gone on, and when I went lookin' for you is when I found, when I found that-that other thing."

"Ah," Ford nodded, suddenly finding it hard to breathe.

Neither of them said anything the rest of the ride home.

Notes for the Chapter:

All self-defense moves/references made in this chapter are real and taken from a self-defense class I took (including the fact that it only takes 5 pounds of pressure to rip off somebody's ear). Not knowing what they're up against (or exactly how El's powers work) I think it's reasonable to assume Stan would want Eleven to be able to defend herself (and that he would wait until Ford and Fiddleford weren't around so he could do it his own way).

Oh, and Brenner is definitely, 100% suspicious of Ford and Fidds, but they also haven't done/said anything THAT out of the ordinary, so he can't actually accuse them of not being who they say they are. But he thinks they are definitely, as the kids say, "sus".

9. What Fiddleford Found

Notes for the Chapter:

And now for some feels and reveals :)

Ford pulled up to his house and parked the car. As he shut it off he looked back to Fiddleford, who had all but curled up on the seat. Ford couldn't be sure, but his friend seemed to be getting paler.

"We're home," he said, more to break the oppressive silence than anything. Fiddleford slowly looked up and nodded, then climbed out of the car. Ford took a deep breath, then followed.

El didn't greet them when they entered, but Stanley appeared after a moment.

"Hey nerds," he said, leaning on the doorframe. "How'd it go?"

"Where's Eleven?" said Fiddleford, quietly.

"Upstairs, takin' a nap," said Stan. "Why?"

"Because I got things to tell ya that I don't want 'er to hear," said Fiddleford.

Stan frowned and looked more closely at Fiddleford. "Jeeze, Fids, you look awful, what happened?"

"Can we sit down first?" Fiddleford said, tiredly. "And maybe have some tea?"

Stan hesitated, then nodded quickly. "Okay, yeah, sure, tea it is then." He hurried towards the kitchen.

Feeling more concerned by the moment for his friend, Ford gently laid a hand on Fiddleford's arm. "Come on, Fiddleford, we can sit in the living room and wait."

Fiddleford allowed himself to be guided to the couch and sat curled up in one corner, automatically drawing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around him. He looked more haunted than Ford had seen him in years.

They sat in silence until Stan returned with the tea. He set a mug on the stand beside Fiddleford, handed another to Ford, and sat down next to his brother.

Fiddleford unraveled a bit so he could sit crosslegged and hold the tea huddled to his chest. He stared into it for a few minutes, as if hoping it would help him forget. When it did not, he took a sip and finally looked up at them.

“I’m only gonna say this once,” he warned them. “I can’t- I don’t wanna think about it. I wish I’d never gone down there.”

“Down where?” Stan asked, but his voice was softer than normal.

Fiddleford tightened his grip around his mug of tea, and if it was hot he didn’t seem to feel it. “I-I wandered off while we was gettin’ a tour of the lab. At first I found- I found El’s room. It was just stark white, there was nothin’, nothin’ good in there,” his voice hitched a little. “When I came back out Ford was nowhere t’be found so I jus’ started walkin’. I found an elevator. It-it had bloodstains on the walls.”

Ford and Stan shared an alarmed look, then quickly returned their focus to Fiddleford.

Fiddleford continued, his voice growing shakier with each word. “I got out an’ the place down there, it ain’t- it ain’t natural. I dunno what it is, what’s down there, but I-I-”

His breathing turned into quick gasps, and his hands shook, threatening to spill his tea. Ford gently reached out and took the cup from him, setting it back on the stand and laid a hand on Fiddleford’s shoulder.

“Fiddleford, it’s alright,” he said, quietly. “You’re safe, nothing’s going to hurt you here.”

“Yeah, an’ we ain’t gonna make you go back there,” said Stan.

Fiddleford nodded. There were tears gathering in his eyes as he fought to control his breathing. Stan got up and gently pushed Ford aside. He wrapped his arms around Fiddleford and hugged him until the other man stopped gasping and his shaking started to quell. Stan pulled back, but left a hand resting on Fiddleford’s shoulder.

“Thanks,” said Fiddleford in a small voice. He drew in a deep

breath and visibly tried to compose himself. "A-anyway. That place down there, it was dark an' it had stuff floatin' in the air like- like ash that never made it to the ground. An'- an' there were vines-" Fiddleford shuddered. "Vines all over the walls. They were covered in slime like tentacles. An' it was, it was cold down there. Cold that creeps in your bones an' stays there."

Ford felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Whatever the lab was hiding was far more than just illegal child experiments. He couldn't help the little spark of excitement that came to life in his heart as he realized there was something supernatural going on. For Fiddleford's sake though he pushed it aside and forced himself to focus.

"I went down that hallway for what felt like forever," Fiddleford continued. "Near the end the vine things were on the floor too- tripped over some a'them," he shuddered again. "An', an' there was a light, kinda reddish. An' some sorta observation box. An' right across from it there was- th-there w-was..."

Tears gathered in Fiddleford's eyes again. Stan squeezed his shoulder.

"What, Fidds?" Stan asked, gently.

"Th-there was a hole in the wall," Fiddleford whispered. "Like s-s-some sorta awful doorway. Th-the vines came outta it, it-it looked like it was gonna swallow everythin' up. It was *evil*!"

He spat the last word, then leaned back and covered his face with his hands, shivering. Stan pulled a blanket off the fort still sitting in the living room and wrapped it around him.

Ford stood and started to pace. "There must be a connection here somewhere," he said. "You said it looked like a door?"

"O-or the mouth of a monster," said Fiddleford.

"A door to what?" Ford wondered. "And how does it connect to Eleven? And the monster in the forest, that thing was like nothing I had seen in Gravity Falls before, and I wondered if it might have come from the lab- but a door, with vines and a contaminated space around it- oh, Fiddleford, could I take a sample of your blood? If there were contaminants in the air they may have entered your bloodstream and-"

“Ford,” growled Stan, warningly.

“It’s okay,” said Fiddleford, standing and swaying a little. “I wanna know if anything there was gonna hurt me. An’ then I’m gonna go take a shower.”

Eleven woke up to the sound of a door quietly opening and closing. Her eyes flew open. Were Ford and Fiddleford back?

Then she saw the ceiling above her and frowned. She wasn’t in the living room. She was in her room upstairs. Maybe Stan put her to bed?

She rolled onto her side and saw Fiddleford sitting on his bed in his pajamas. His elbows were on his knees and his hands were pressed into his face. Was he upset? Why?

Even as she thought it she heard Fiddleford take a shaking, watery breath that turned into a sob. She frowned and sat up. Why was he crying? What was wrong?

El got up and padded over to him. She gently laid a hand on his shoulder like he did when she was scared and said, “Fiddleford?”

He jumped and looked at her with wide eyes. She pulled her hand back and watched him closely.

“El, I-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean t’wake you,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

El hesitantly patted his shoulder. “It’s okay.”

He stared at her for a moment, then abruptly reached out and hugged her. El hugged him back. She patted his back and rubbed her hand up and down it like he did when she woke up from a nightmare. He made a noise that sounded like a laugh and a sob at once and hugged her tighter.

Finally he pulled back, but he left his hands on her arms, holding onto them gently. He bowed his head and breathed

unsteadily.

“Why upset?” she asked.

“Oh, I, it’s nothin’,” he said.

El shook her head. “What’s wrong?” she insisted. He didn’t let her stay upset without trying to help, so she wasn’t going to let him stay upset without trying to help either.

Fiddleford sighed. “I guess yer gonna hear about it anyway. Me an’ Stanford went to the lab you’re from today.”

El suddenly felt cold. Her eyes grew wide and she took a step back. Fiddleford looked up at her quickly, feelings in his eyes that she couldn’t name.

“We didn’t turn you in, El, we’d never do that, but we, we want y’to be safe, so we figured we’d better know what we’re up against an’ so Stanford an’ I went in an’ looked around, but we’d never tell them about you, never ever, *ever*.” He gripped her arms tighter and she believed him. She nodded once. He suddenly let go of her and slumped down.

She sat on the bed beside him and put her hand on his back. He was shaking. Why was he so scared?

“I found somethin’ in the lab, somethin’ awful,” Fiddleford continued after a moment. “Down- down in the basement there.”

El froze. No. Oh no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no-

“I dunno what it is,” Fiddleford went on. “But I wish I could forget it. I can see why y’call it ‘the bad place’ now, El.”

El pulled back her hand and clutched it to her chest, suddenly filled with her own shaking. They knew about the Gate. Fiddleford, it could have gotten Fiddleford.

“El? Are-are y’okay? I didn’t mean t’scare you, I’m sorry.”

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. She hugged him suddenly and held onto him like her life depended on it.

“Woah, I- El, it’s okay, I- look, I’m sorry, I shoulda waited

t'tell you about the lab, I-

"No," she said.

"What?"

"No," she repeated, softer. Then, almost inaudibly. "I'm sorry.

"What- what are you sorry fer, El?"

Tears streamed down her face. If she told him then they might not let her stay. They might make her leave or worse, send her back to the lab.

But she had to tell them, she had to. She couldn't let them get hurt.

"The Gate," she whispered. "I opened it."

10. What Eleven Did

Footsteps pounded down the stairs and into the dining room. Stan and Ford looked up in surprise as Fiddleford dashed in, wide eyed and breathless.

“El knows about the Gate.”

Ford stood up quickly. “What?”

Fiddleford sagged against the doorway. A moment later El appeared beside him. She looked nervous and worried, but she reached up and took Fiddleford’s hand, holding tightly to it.

“The door under the lab?” Ford clarified. “She knows-”
“I opened it.”

Eleven’s voice was small and not above a whisper.

Time seemed to stand still as the occupants of the room stared at each other. There was unrestrained fear in Eleven’s eyes, and she looked ready to run, but stayed just as frozen as the rest of them.

Finally, Stan stood and walked over, kneeling in front of her. “Kid, I think you should tell us the whole story. How ‘bout I make you some hot chocolate and we go sit on the couch, alright?”

El nodded, still looking unsure.

The little party moved into the living room. Stan returned with the promised hot chocolate and gave it to El then sat down next to her on the couch. Fiddleford sat on the other side of her and Ford sat in the armchair next to the couch.

“I have questions,” said Ford, once they were settled.

“Ford,” Stan said, warningly.

Ford ignored him. “First, El, perhaps you should tell us the full extent of your powers.”

Stan looked at the little girl. “That alright with you, kid?”

El nodded, staring down at the floor. She was quiet for a few moments. No one dared press her.

"Can find people," she said, finally. "With a picture and," she frowned. "Static. Or in the bath."

"What does that mean, exactly?" Ford asked.

El scrunched up her face, thinking. "Find people," she repeated. "Far away."

"Like a trackin' device," said Fiddleford.

"What'd you mean about the bath, El?" Stan asked.

"Bath. Under saltwater," said El.

Ford's expression cleared. "A sensory deprivation tank."

"That don't sound fun," said Stan, raising an eyebrow.

El shook her head. "Isn't. Is how I—" her shoulders hunched and she squeezed her eyes shut.

They waited. Fiddleford wrapped an arm around her and Stan set a hand on her shoulder. Ford resisted the urge to tap his pen against his notebook as he thought.

"Is how I met the monster," El whispered.

There was a pause, then, "Wait, that monster in the forest?" Stan asked.

El nodded miserably, trying to curl tighter into herself.

"Wait, you were looking for it?" Ford asked, frowning.

"No!" El shook her head fiercely. "Was just, there. I didn't mean to—"

Her voice shook, and her eyes started to fill with tears.

"Kid, we don't think you let a monster out on purpose," said Stan, gently. "An' we ain't gonna let it get you."

El sniffed and nodded. At Stan's prompting she took a few sips of hot chocolate and started to calm down a little.

"Papa wanted me to- to talk to it," El continued softly. "Didn't want to. Bad."

There was a pause before Ford dared to ask, "El, who do you mean by 'papa'?"

El looked down. "Bad, b-bad man. In charge." She curled up. "Hurt me."

"Brenner," Fiddleford spat.

“That sick son of a-” Stan growled.

“Language, Stanley,” Ford said, quickly. “What happened when you tried to talk to the monster, El? Can you tell us?”

El started to shake. Stan took her cup and set it on the floor and scooted closer to her, until she was pressed up against his side. “It’s okay, El,” he said. “Whatever that thing is it ain’t gonna get you here.”

El rubbed tears out of her eyes. “I touched it. It turned and I-I r-ran, sc-screamed, I d-didn’t mean to, the G-Gate, I l-let it out, I let it out!”

She was nearly hyperventilating by the time she had gasped out of the end of her story. Stan picked her up and held her, rocking her gently and shooting worried glances at Ford and Fiddleford.

Fiddleford reached out and clasped one of El’s hands. “It’s okay, El, sweetheart, it’s okay, you’re okay, little one.”

They sat like that for a while. In the chair next to them Ford pressed his head into his hands and mumbled, “Sometimes I hate being right.”

When El’s breathing had calmed and she had stopped making little gasping-sobbing noises Ford took a deep breath, ignored the look Stan gave him, and asked another question.

“El, where did you find the monster? If it didn’t come from the lab where did it come from?”

El took a breath. She didn’t know how to describe the place with words, she didn’t have the right ones. She scanned the room for something to use to explain and her gaze landed on the “nerd board game” Stan said Ford and Fiddleford liked to play.

She pushed her way out of Stan’s arms and knelt down next to it, pushing away the papers scattered on top of and around it. The three men gathered around her and she set the board right-side up in

the middle of them.

Then, she flipped it upside down.

She grabbed one of the funny little monster figures out of the pile of papers and set it on the board.

"I'm confused," said Ford, after a moment.

"Don't look at me, pointdexter, it's your nerd game," said Stan.

Fiddleford frowned at the board. "Is that the demogorgon?"

"It appears to be," said Ford. "Does it matter?"

"I dunno," Fiddleford ran a hand through his hair.

"She flipped the board upside down," said Stan. "Kid, what does that mean?"

El flipped the board back over, sending the little monster figure flying. "Here," she pointed at the top of the board. She flipped it back over and tapped it, setting the monster back. "There."

"Wait," said Ford, starting to sound excited. "It's a parallel world! It has to be!"

"You did *not* get that from two words and her flipping the board back and forth," said Stan, rolling his eyes.

Ford ignored him. "Don't you see? The world the monster is from must be a copy of our own, but different somehow, yet still connected to our own- the upside down version of it!"

El nodded. She didn't know exactly what Ford's words meant, but they sounded right.

"Wait a second," said Fiddleford. He looked at her. "Is that world what's creepin' into the lab's basement?"

Her face fell and she nodded. "From the Gate," she said quietly.

"Oh my word," Fiddleford sat back and dragged a hand down his face. "It's different alright. Must be some sorta nightmare dimension."

"So we've got a supernatural monster from another version of our world," said Stan. "That's just great. Jeeze, those scientists were nutjobs! Makin' a little kid talk to a monster and set it loose!" he looked at Ford. "I better be gettin' to punch those guys soon."

El hesitated, looking between the three of them. “Not mad?”

“About what?” Ford asked, not looking up from his frantic scribbling in his notebook.

“Me,” El said softly, twisting her shirt in her hands. “Opening the Gate.”

There was a pause. They all looked at her, even Ford. She watched them nervously.

“El,” said Fiddleford, reaching out and taking her hand. “We’re not mad at you, sweetheart. Don’t you ever think we’d be made at you about this.”

“Fidds is right, kid, this ain’t your fault,” Stan agreed. “Now those guys in the lab, I’m gonna make them wish they’d never been born.”

Ford smiled at her. “Eleven, I’ve been hoping to find proof of alternate universes since I was a child, except for the obvious trauma this has caused you, this is a dream come true for me.”

“There’s also the monster runnin’ around in the woods,” said Fiddleford. “That’s more of a nightmare.”

Ford shrugged. “To each his own.”

El yawned, suddenly tired, despite her nap earlier. She crawled over and curled up inside the blanket fort, listening to the voices of her friends and trying to relax. She had told them. They weren’t angry or trying to make her leave. It would be okay. Maybe they could even fix it.

After a little while, Fiddleford joined her inside and curled up next to her. She reached out and took his hand. He squeezed it gently.

She shut her eyes and fell asleep, listening to the voices of Ford and Stan argue outside the fort and feeling Fiddleford’s warm hand wrapped around her own.

She was safe.

(For now)

Notes for the Chapter:

You have no idea how happy I was when I realized I could use the same analogy for the Upside Down because the Gravity Falls universe has its own version of DnD xD It also means there's no reason I can't call the demogorgon the same thing, which just simplifies my life.

Anyway, things are about to ramp up to 11. :)

11. Something Wicked This Way Comes

Notes for the Chapter:

throws you headfirst into the action It's gonna get worse before it gets better :)

Also, random note, but for some reason Word, where I write my stories before I post them, insists on capitalizing "demogorgon" every time I type it and I'm not sure why it even considers that a word, let alone a word that needs capitalizing, but I'm not going to edit it every time so it's just like that now.

Three days later, a white van pulled up in front of the cabin.

Stan looked out the window and swore. "WE GOT COMPANY!" he bellowed into the house.

Fiddleford and El flew out of the living room, eyes wide. Stan shoved them up the stairs.

"Fidds, they're here, get your stuff and get the kid ready, we need to go," said Stan. "FORD!"

"I'm *coming*!" Ford appeared in a flurry of papers. "What is it?"

"Your friends from the lab are here," said Stan, already pulling on a coat and walking into the living room to grab a backpack stashed behind the sofa. "Get your stuff- and hurry, pointdexter! Remember, we can't take the whole house!"

Ford was already running off again. "I know, Stanley!"

Upstairs, Fiddleford grabbed two backpacks from the closet and handed the smaller one to Eleven. "It's gonna be okay," he said. "We've been plannin' in case this happened."

El clutched the backpack tightly. "The bad men?"

"Yeah," said Fiddleford. "We ain't gonna let 'em get you, El, don't worry. C'mon, we gotta get your coat and shoes."

“Wait!” El dashed over to her bed and grabbed The Hobbit from beside the pillow, shoving it into her backpack.

Fiddleford grinned at her. “Girl after my own heart. Now c’mon.”

They dashed downstairs. Stan updated them while El got her shoes and coat on.

“There’s at least three vans,” he said. “They’re around the back too, we’re gonna have to climb onto the roof and get out that way. FORD, WHAT’S TAKIN’ SO LONG?”

Ford hurried out, frantically zipping a backpack with papers peeking out of it. “I had to hide my most important research!” he said. “If those idiots got ahold of it-”

“Yeah, okay, whatever, all of you get up the stairs, now!” said Stan.

They ran back up to the attic. Someone pounded on the front door. Ford pushed the window open and looked around. “They seem to be concentrated on the back and front entrances.”

“Good,” said Stan. “Stay low an’ hope they don’t see us.”

They slunk onto the roof, carefully making their way along it until they came to a point with a number of crates stacked below it in a formation that looked suspiciously like stairs. Behind them came an ominous thumping noise.

“Go,” whispered Stan, crouching on the roof and watching the yard around them warily.

Ford scrambled down the boxes and helped Eleven down. Fiddleford followed, and, finally, Stan slipped after them.

The thumping stopped abruptly as a crack rent the air. Eleven flinched. Ford winced.

They crouched in the shadows of the shack, ears pricked, eyes fixed on the open space between them and the forest.

“It won’t take ‘em long to find out we aren’t there,” said Stan. “We gotta move. Fidds, take the kid and don’t stop runnin’ till you

get to the woods. Ford an' I'll be right behind you."

"Why am I in the back?" Ford asked.

"Because there ain't a bullet made that could get through that mess of books and papers in your backpack, Ford," said Stan. "Now, on my signal, run in a zigzag for the trees. An' don't bunch together, we're trying not to be one big target here."

Stan poked his head out and looked around. He took a deep breath and nodded.

"Now!"

The four of them ran like mad. They were halfway to the trees when they heard yells and the gunshots started. Bullets whizzed around them as Hawkins' soldiers attacked.

They threw themselves into the cover of the forest, not daring to stop. Bullets hit trees around them, and they heard shouts as their attackers drew closer.

Luckily, no one alive knew the forest of Gravity Falls better than the trio of men who had just entered. Ford steered them deeper into the trees. Stan hung back listening for pursuit.

When shouts and shots behind them died away and were replaced by wind and birdsong they finally slowed their frantic pace. Wordlessly, the four of them gravitated to a grotto and sat down in its shade.

"Well that went well," said Stan. "You okay, kid?"

El nodded. Her eyes were wide and she quivered a little, but beyond that she seemed no worse for wear.

"We really ought to have made some sort of alarm system," muttered Ford. "Or cameras, that would have been a good idea."

"Well you can set it up for next time, sixer," said Stan. He pulled a water bottle out of his pack and passed it around.

Stan took it back and frowned, pulling his hand away from it. "Alright, who's bleeding?" he asked, holding up his red-splotched hand. "There's no prize for bleeding to death."

Fiddleford sighed. "It ain't that bad," he grumbled. "One

a'the bullets grazed me while we were runnin'," he said, holding out his right arm. There was a bloody hole torn in the sleeve of his jacket. "It wasn't important enough to stop for."

"Well it's important enough to deal with now," said Stan, already pulling out a first aid kit. "And by the way, we should really make a plan to get outta this mess. Any ideas?"

"Well," said Ford after a moment. "The lab will really be after us now, so we ought to do something unexpected."

"Like what?" Stan asked, not looking up from cleaning the blood off Fiddleford's arm.

"Like heading back towards the lab," said Ford.

Stan paused. "Huh."

"It might work," said Fiddleford. "They'll be expectin' us to head outta Gravity Falls."

"Which means they won't be payin' as much attention to their home turf," Stan nodded. "Not bad, sixer."

Ford beamed with the praise for a moment, then grew serious again. "There's a fence that runs around the lab- it extends into the woods. If we reach it that should make us far enough away to not be found by any patrols or seen by cameras."

"We'll need to lay a false trail," said Stan. He finished bandaging Fiddleford's wound and patted him on the shoulder. "You'll live to annoy us with your banjo another day, Fidds," he said solemnly.

Fiddleford rolled his eyes. "Grand."

"I'll lay the trail," said Stan, standing and brushing leaves off his clothes. "You guys head to the lab, I'll catch up with you."

"Don't get caught," said Ford.

"And be careful of the monster," Fiddleford added.

El stood and hugged him tightly. "Come back."

"Aw, don't worry about me, kid," Stan patted her head. "Take care of the nerds for me, an' remember how I taught ya to fight."

El looked up at him and nodded. "Left hook," she said, quietly.

He grinned. "That's my girl. I'll be back before you know it."

They waited until they could no longer see or hear Stan making his way through the trees. Then Ford took a deep breath and

stood.

“I supposed we’d better get moving.”

By the time they reached the lab’s fence, it was getting dark.

Eleven was nervous. Not only were the bad men after them, but the monster- the Demogorgon, as Ford had started calling it- was somewhere in the forest with them. She stuck close to Ford and Fiddleford as the men searched for a campsite.

Ford stopped in a small clearing behind a small hill. “This looks like a good spot,” he said.

Fiddleford looked around. He seemed as scared as she was. “I think we’d be safer in the trees.”

“The trees?” Ford raised an eyebrow.

“Well if anybody from the lab has managed to track us out here they’ll be lookin’ on the ground, not up in the trees,” Fiddleford reasoned. “An’, well, there’s also the matter of that monster.”

Ford looked up at the trees around them. “We can’t light a fire in the trees,” he countered. “Most monsters aren’t fond of fire.”

Fiddleford glanced at the darkening woods. “I guess so,” he said, finally.

They set up a small fire and used a funny little metal box on a stick to make what Fiddleford called “hobo pies”. They were good, but El was too nervous to eat more than one of them. She jumped at ever sound the forest made, and her eyes scanned the shadows anxiously.

Suddenly she felt cold, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She looked around wildly, heart pounding.

Fiddleford must have felt it too, because he grabbed Ford’s arm and tugged him away from his journal.

“Stanford, I really think we oughta get off the ground,” he said, his voice shaking.

Ford sighed. "I thought we were past this."

"Stanford, please, this is not the time to get stubborn!"

El walked around and tugged Ford's other arm. "Please?" she pleaded.

Ford huffed, but snapped his journal shut and shoved it in his bag. "Fine, if it'll make you two feel safer, we'll move into the trees."

They gathered up their things and Ford put out the fire. Fiddleford scrambled up a tree like a squirrel and perched on a branch above them.

"Up you go," said Ford, picking her up so she could grab hold of Fiddleford. He swung her into the tree, and, in spite of everything, she smiled a little. Climbing trees was fun.

Fiddleford helped her further up into the tree and Ford climbed up after them. Soon, the three of them were sitting quietly in the huge branches, waiting.

She tugged Fiddleford's sleeve. "Like dwarves in *The Hobbit*," she said softly.

She could hear the smile in Fiddleford's voice. "Heh, you're right, El. Too bad this ain't a pine tree."

"Why?"

"'Cause then we could throw burnin' pinecones at our enemies like in the book," said Fiddleford. "But this here's a maple tree, an' they don't have pinecones."

"Oh," said El, looking through the branches.

They were quiet again, after that. El shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. She felt the same fear and dread she had a week ago when the monster appeared in the forest. Fiddleford put an arm around her shoulders and she huddled against him, her eyes fixed on the ground below them.

Then, movement. El watched as a dark shape moved through the clearing. She could hear it gurgling and snuffling as it moved to the remains of their campfire.

Then it looked up.

El stifled a cry and buried her face in Fiddleford's jacket. She

heard Ford gasp and felt Fiddleford squeeze her tighter.

She wasn't sure how long she stayed there, frozen, not daring to look down. When she finally had enough courage to look at the ground again...

The monster was gone.

A twig snapped. El jumped. A few moments later she heard a shuffling noise. Had the monster come back?

Then she heard the grumbling of a voice and a second later Ford called out in a loud whisper, "Stanley, up here!"

The shuffling stopped and a familiar voice replied, "Jeeze, Ford, what're you doin' in a *tree*?"

Relief coursed through her. She shut her eyes and listened to the scraping sounds as Stanley climbed into the tree.

"What are we, birds now?" Stan asked when he was perched in the tree with them.

"Did ya see the monster, Stanley?" Fiddleford asked.

"What, that Demogorgon thing? No, why?"

"It was just here," said Ford. "And if I hadn't listened to Fiddleford and Eleven we might not have been here for you to find."

A pause, then, "Jeeze, I leave you guys for half a day an' you almost get eaten. Sheesh. Monsters, psycho scientists, maybe we really shoulda built that bunker thing you guys were talking about a while ago."

Eleven smiled. She was glad they were together again, glad they were safe.

But when she shut her eyes she saw the monster's faceless gaze looking up at them again and she couldn't stop a shudder. Why was it hunting them? What did it want?

The answer was obvious, and she had been avoiding it since the first time they saw it in the woods. But now they were on the run, and it was putting everyone in danger with the bad men and the Demogorgon.

The monster wanted her, just like the bad men did. As long as she stayed with her friends it would hunt them. It might hurt them. She couldn't let that happen.

She was glad no one could see her tears in the dark to ask about them, because she didn't know how to explain.

But she did know one thing:

She had to leave.

Notes for the Chapter:

*that awkward moment when you don't realize blood
draws the demogorgon*
They'll be fine... probably.

12. Of Monsters and Bad Men

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, here we go, we're getting close to the end now. I've been looking forward to posting these next few chapters.

Thank you all for your comments and kudos! They're very encouraging.

It was the next day, in the afternoon, when El had her chance to leave.

They were slowly making their way through the forest, following in the wake of the bad men with the hope that they were far enough ahead that El and her friends wouldn't run into them. Ford had said he knew of some good places in the woods to hide and that they were heading towards one of them.

El's chance came when they encountered a wall of sticks and thornbushes, too big for them to go around quickly. Ford said they should try and get through it with a big knife he had called a "machete". Stan said that they should just go around. Fiddleford said it would take less time to go around then it would for Ford and Stan to stop arguing.

They weren't paying any attention to her. El swallowed and clenched her hands into fists. She didn't want to leave. She felt safe with them.

But they weren't safe with her. She blinked as tears filled her eyes and shook her head. She had to do this. They would get hurt if she didn't, and she wanted them to be safe.

She walked away. She listened to their voices get quieter and quieter, until she couldn't hear them at all, just the birds and the wind in the trees. She sniffled and finally let her tears fall as she headed farther and farther from the only three people in the world who had ever loved her and tried to keep her safe.

It took them nearly half an hour to cut through and clear out the branches and thorns. Fiddleford took a deep breath and looked around. He frowned.

“El?” he called. He walked around outside the tunnel they’d cleared but El was nowhere to be seen. A jolt went through his heart when he realized he hadn’t seen her since they started working.

He hurried back to the others. “Anybody seen El?”

“I thought she was with you,” said Stan.

“She was,” said Fiddleford. “I left her right outside where we were workin’ but there’s no sign of her now.”

“Did she wander off?” said Ford.

“She never goes far away from us,” said Stan. “Why would she start now?”

“We’d have heard if somebody took her,” Fiddleford said, as much to reassure himself as the others. “Or if the monster showed up.”

“But why else would she disappear?” Ford asked.

“When we find her, we’ll ask her,” said Stan. “C’mon, we’d better get lookin’.”

They spread out, calling the girl’s name as loudly as they dared, and growing more worried and frantic every moment there was no response. Soon the three of them were running and shouting, heedless of any danger from monsters or men.

Finally, ragged, exhausted, and defeated, they came back together.

“I don’t understand,” said Fiddleford. “How did she get so far away she can’t hear us?”

“I don’t think that’s the problem, Fidds,” said Stan. “I just don’t think she wants to be found.”

Fiddleford frowned. “What do you mean?”

“She ran away,” said Stan. “That’s gotta be why we haven’t found her yet. You said yourself that we’d have heard her if

somebody or something tried to take her away.”

“But why would she run away?” Ford asked. “I thought she was, well,” he looked down. “Happy with us.”

“I think she was too,” said Stan. “But she’s scared. I think she realized she’s puttin’ us in danger by stickin’ around, so she ran off.”

Fiddleford slumped against a tree and covered his face with his hands. “Oh no.”

“Yeah,” said Stan. “An’ now we gotta find her before she gets herself into a mess.”

“Where do you think she’d go?” Ford asked. “Could she find her way back to the house?”

“Maybe, but that ain’t where she’ll go. Little kid with a backpack of survival supplies who’s convinced she put her friends in danger? She’s gonna head as far away as she can, Ford,” said Stan. His face was grim and set. “We gotta get deeper into the woods, stick together, an’ keep callin’ for her. It doesn’t matter if the guys from the lab find us at this point anyway since we don’t got the kid.”

“What about the Demogorgon?” Fiddleford asked quietly.

Stan shrugged. “Hopefully it decides three people is too big of a group to attack. And if it does find us, well, I’ve been itching to punch something.”

Fiddleford rolled his eyes. “How comforting.” He dug the hobo pie maker out of his backpack and wielded it like a sword. “I guess if we gotta fight that thing to get El back then that’s what we gotta do.”

Ford nodded, gripping his machete. “We’d better get going then.”

El was tired. She had been walking for a long time, and it was lonely without her friends. Even when they were trying to be quiet Stan still told her jokes and stories and Fiddleford held her hand and Ford made comments like, “Nearly there” and, “Be careful here, we don’t want the gnomes to notice us”. It was nice, and she missed it. She missed them.

El sat down on a log and sighed. She didn’t know where she

was going. Would anyone else try to help her? Or would they just turn her over to the bad men? If she found someone to help her, would the monster go after them too?

She rubbed the tears away that were forming in her eyes. She would just have to stay by herself until she was far away, where the Demogorgon couldn't find her.

She stood up and spied a group of bushes that curved around in a half circle. She walked over and sat down in the middle of them. This seemed safe.

El curled up on the ground and fell asleep.

El woke to the snap of a twig.

She tensed and forced her breathing to be quiet. She opened her eyes and sat up slowly, looking around.

There! Movement, not far from her bushes.

It was a man, she realized, not the monster. But it wasn't Stan, Ford, or Fiddleford, so that meant...

She looked around and saw more men, men with guns walking through the woods. Her breath hitched and her heart pounded. She had been stupid, stupid, stupid!

If she moved, the bad men would see her, but if she stayed they would find her. Maybe she could run away like they did from the cabin- the bad men hadn't seen them until too late then.

She waited, watching the men move around her. When she didn't see any looking her way, she ran.

At first she thought it would work. She ran as fast as she could, just like before, but this time-

“There she is!”

El gasped and tried to run faster, but suddenly there was a man in front of her. She shrieked and blasted him back. He thumped against a tree and lay still.

Before she could start to run again she heard footsteps pounding, and more men appeared. She threw them back too.

She ran, but not fast enough. One of the men grabbed her by her coat. She stopped and jabbed her elbow into his stomach. He gasped and she whipped around. He was doubled over, so she grabbed his ears and yanked. He stumbled and yelped, and she knocked her fist into his head the way Stan had showed her.

She ran, but there were more men. Too many. Why so many? They circled her, and she felt panic well up inside her. She couldn't go back to the bad place. She wouldn't, she *wouldn't*!

As the men completed the circle around her and moved in closer the fear building inside her *exploded*.

“NO!” El screamed, throwing up her hands and squeezing her eyes shut. The men flew back, crashing into trees and rocks away from her.

El stumbled forward, suddenly exhausted. She sank to her knees and sobbed. Her nose was bleeding again, and maybe her ears too.

Then a voice spoke and chilled her to the bone.

“Well done, Eleven.”

She jerked her head up. “Papa, no-” she tried to stand, but fell to the ground again, shaking.

Papa walked forward. She saw his boots and heard them crunch in the leaves. She quivered, too weak to try and stop him. He knelt down in front of her but she didn't look at him. She wouldn't.

“There, there, Eleven,” he said softly. “Don't worry. This will all be over soon and you'll be safe at home again.”

“Not my home,” said El, doing her best to growl like Stan did when he was angry.

“Oh but it is,” said Papa, reaching out a hand and lifting up her chin. His voice was quiet, but his eyes were cold. “And we have missed you.”

“No,” she tried to growl again.

“We’ll see,” said Papa. He stood. “Bring her.”

Two men picked her up by her arms. She struggled weakly, but finally fell still. It was over. The bad men had caught her.

Her tears fell and she sobbed as they shoved her into a van. She looked up and caught one last glimpse of the forest, hoping in vain that she might see Stan, Ford and Fiddleford running towards them to rescue her.

But there was no one, and the doors closed, shutting her in darkness and despair.

It may have consoled Eleven to know that her three guardians were looking for her and that they would have liked nothing more than to find her at that moment and unleash Hell on the men from the lab.

Unfortunately, said guardians were currently wandering around a completely different part of the forest, and Stan, for one, was beginning to think they were lost. Of course, he had full confidence that Ford could get them unlost, but the unfamiliar part of the forest was doing nothing to raise his spirits.

It was starting to get dark. Stan knew they ought to head home, but he absolutely refused to be the one to suggest the idea. Going home meant giving up, even if it was only temporary, and Stan Pines was not one to give up easily, especially when it involved someone he cared about.

As the sun went down, the forest was bathed in shadow and

eerie light. The trees were still. Not a breath of wind stirred anything. The birds fell quiet. The wood was silent.

If Stan had been a little less focused on finding El, he might have taken note of these things and realized that they reminded him of another recent adventure in the forest. As it was, the silence and stillness barely registered.

“It’s getting awfully dark,” said Fiddleford. “We aren’t gonna be able to see anything soon. We could pass right by El and not know she’s there.”

“Not like we were having much luck in the daylight,” said Stan.

“We do have flashlights,” Ford said a little hesitantly.

“Jeeze, I forgot about the flashlights,” said Stan, unzipping his backpack and pulling one out. “Nevermind, we can keep going for a while.”

Fiddleford didn’t argue, but Stan could feel nervousness radiating off the man. Stan couldn’t blame him- Fiddleford never did well with monsters, and the past few weeks had been particularly harrowing in that regard. Stan stuck a little closer to him to try and lend his silent moral support.

Was it getting colder? It seemed colder, but maybe that was just because the sun was going down. Still, something felt wrong about it...

It was then that he realized everything was silent and unnaturally still. Too late he put the pieces together in his mind and opened his mouth to say something.

Fiddleford screamed.

Stan turned just in time to see Fiddleford get yanked off his feet and dragged into the darkness. Before he had made sense of that he was running, yelling for Ford to follow him.

He caught up with Fiddleford and the monster in a small clearing. The Demogorgon stood, still holding onto one of Fiddleford’s ankles and trying to use its other hand to grab the hobo

pie maker Fiddleford was frantically whacking it with. Stan had to give it to the man, Fiddleford might be easily scared, but he wasn't a coward.

Stan slipped on his brass knuckles and rushed the monster. "HEY UGLY! EAT THIS!"

He slammed his fist into the monster's head, knocking it back. It released its hold on Fiddleford and turned to Stan-

-And then its face *opened*.

"Holy Moses!" Stan yelled, jumping back as the demogorgon's head unfolded like the petals of some horrifying flower, revealing rows of razor sharp teeth and a slavering maw.

The Demogorgon lunged at him, and Stan only just jerked back in time to avoid his arm being ripped off. The demogorgon's momentum brought it forward-

-into the exact right spot to be sliced by Ford's machete.

The creature screamed, and Stan covered his ears. A cut had appeared on the monster's chest and it oozed black liquid.

Ford swung at it again. "Get away from my brother!" he yelled.

Ford was obviously aiming for the thing's head, but the monster was tall and Ford's stroke too low. Another gash joined the first on the demogorgon's chest, this one deeper.

The creature roared and swung out its fist. Stan jerked Ford back and the two of them toppled to the ground. Stan looked up just in time to see the Demogorgon flee into a blood-red gash in a tree trunk, which proceeded to close behind the monster.

They sat there for a moment, breathing hard, trying to make sense of what they'd just seen. Or, Stan was, anyway, Ford had probably already figured it out.

"Thanks," Stan said, quietly.

Ford nodded. "Don't mention it," he looked over into the

shadows at the base of the tree. “Fiddleford, are you alright?”

Stan felt a small jolt of panic, and was halfway to his feet when he heard a quiet, hysterical laugh.

“I have never been less okay in my *life*, Stanford,” said Fiddleford. Stan walked over and found him still lying on the ground, staring up at the trees.

Stan sighed. “Guess we shoulda gone home after all.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I honestly cannot remember if they ever got the demogorgon to actually bleed in the show, so my descriptions of its injuries are my best guess at what would happen if it were suddenly sliced with a machete.

13. A Plan to Forget

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright! I'm back with another chapter. Sorry for leaving you all with a cliffhanger, my mental health hasn't been great these past few days and I've been having some personal struggles. I am hoping to finish the story soon though.

Oh, also, I mention a bit of background stuff here, but since nothing is outright explained, have a timeline:

So nine years ago Stan got kicked out.

Six years ago Ford finished college

Five years ago Fiddleford came to work at the Shack

Three years ago Stan showed up and Ford let him stay and they worked out their issues

Got it? Okay!

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this update!

Fiddleford sat on the floor of his room with his head in his hands. It had been about an hour since they'd made it home and he was exhausted. But he knew he'd never be able to sleep. Because whenever he closed his eyes all he saw was that thing standing above him, trying to drag him who-knows-where, its face opening and all those teeth and-

Fiddleford took a ragged breath. He lifted his eyes towards the closet.

Slowly, he crawled over to it. Dug through inventions and boxes of papers until he reached the bottom. Pulled out a briefcase.

Hands shaking, he sat back and opened it. There, sitting innocuously inside, was a small device that looked something like a ray gun from the science fiction movies he loved. He sighed, ran a hand through his hair, and picked it up.

He played absently with the dial. He wasn't any use to anyone like this, it would be better if he forgot. Then he would be able to think clearly and help Stan and Ford find Eleven, instead of hiding up in his room, unable to sleep because he couldn't deal with something *again*.

He just had to erase one thing. Just the monster, that was all, surely even Ford couldn't find fault with that. He would still remember everything else, it would be fine.

Just one thing.

Just one thing...

Fiddleford frowned, suddenly worried. What if erasing the Demogorgon also damaged his memories of Eleven? They were rather tied together, after all, the monster and the little girl. Would he forget things about her? Adventures they'd had? He didn't want that. Even the ones that had ended badly were still important.

Maybe... maybe he could just erase the demogorgon's attack. Eleven wasn't part of that. Yes, that was a better idea.

He nodded to himself and started to type in the words-

-paused.

Wait.

Forget Eleven?

Fiddleford's eyes widened as an idea began to take shape in his mind.

Suddenly, he shot to his feet and ran down the stairs, yelling, "STANLEY, STANFORD, I FIGURED IT OUT!"

Stan and Ford sat in the living room. Ford sketched and wrote things in his journal, while Stan sipped a beer from the stash he'd been keeping hidden under his bed (for emergencies) since

Eleven got there.

This qualified as an emergency.

Stan rubbed his eyes and sighed. "One of us should probably go check on Fidds," he said.

Ford looked up, blinking owlishly. "Oh. Right. Er, how long have we been back?"

Stan shrugged. "Little over an hour," he peered over Ford's shoulder at the journal. "Sheesh that thing's creepy," he said, pointing at Ford's drawing of the Demogorgon.

"It is *definitely* not from this world," said Ford. "I wish we could have followed it into that tear it disappeared in."

Stan looked at him in disbelief. "Really? You wanna follow the monster who almost ate us into a Hell dimension? Really pointdexter?"

Ford rolled his eyes. "Stanley, I have wanted to find proof of other worlds since I was a child-"

He was cut off by a sudden pounding on the stairs accompanied with excited yelling. A moment later Fiddleford shot into the room, waving his arms.

It was not unusual for Fiddleford to spontaneously have ideas, or to get excited about them. He was, generally, an excitable person. What was odd was that this was considerably less than 24 hours after a major monster attack, and usually during that time Fiddleford was either incredibly jumpy and on edge, or- more disturbingly, in Stan's opinion- quiet, detached and nearly unresponsive. An hour ago when they'd finally gotten home, Fiddleford had been the latter, and now he was running into the living room waving- a ray gun? Over his head and yelling like he'd just won the lottery.

"Ford, Stan, I've got it, I figured it out!" he was nearly jumping up and down in place *and* he'd used the shortened versions of their names. Stan was starting to think the stress had finally gotten to him and Fiddleford had lost it.

"Figured what out, Fiddleford?" Ford asked, not seeming to

find anything out of the ordinary about his friend's behavior.

"I figured out how to get the lab to stop lookin' for Eleven!" said Fiddleford, grinning.

Ford suddenly looked concerned. "Fiddleford, is that, please tell me that isn't what I think it is."

Fiddleford looked at the gun he was holding, as if seeing it for the first time. "Oh, ah, look, Stanford, I know y'don't like the memory gun, but--"

Stan blinked. *Memory gun?*

"You told me you destroyed it!" yelled Ford.

Fiddleford winced. "No, you said I *should* destroy it an' I agreed. But I," he sighed. "Listen, Stanford, I knew somethin' like this would happen, an' y'know I can't handle monsters like you can, so I kept it just in case--"

"It's dangerous!" Ford sprang to his feet and threw his arms out. "How do I know you haven't used it on yourself, or me, or Stanley! How do *you* know you haven't?!"

Fiddleford straightened up and glared at him. "Stanford Pines, I would never use this gun on anybody without their consent, an' I certainly have never used it on you or Stanley." He looked down. "I never even used it on myself, although I was thinkin' about it a few minutes ago," he looked up again, bright eyed and manic again. "But then I had a great idea instead!"

Ford folded his arms, still looking unconvinced.

Stan decided it was time he took a part in this conversation. "Okay, would somebody explain this whole memory gun thing to me? Like, why you have it for starters."

Fiddleford sighed. "I made it after the gremloblin attack that happened not long after I first came here. I kept havin' nightmares about what I saw in its eyes, an' I got desperate, so I figured I'd just," he shrugged. "Forget it. Stanford convinced me it was a bad idea, but I kept it for emergencies."

"So you've just had this thing stashed upstairs for, what, five years now?" Stan prompted.

Fiddleford scratched his head with the gun and nodded. "Been about five years since I came here."

"Well," Stan looked at his brother. "I don't have any weird

gaps in my memory, d'you, pointdexter?"

Ford frowned. "Well no, but the whole point of a memory gun is that you forget."

"Yeah, but there's gotta be some sorta gap it leaves," said Stan. "And anyway, if Fidds had been runnin' around erasing our memories about stuff we'd have noticed *something* was off, right?"

"I suppose so," said Ford.

"Alright, great, so now that we've decided Fidds is still a good person, let's hear his grand idea," said Stan.

Ford had the decency to look sheepish. "I guess I was being rather paranoid. I'm sorry, Fiddleford, I don't actually believe you'd, well, try to mess with our minds like that."

Fiddleford shrugged. "S'okay, Stanford, I forgive you. Now, about my idea," he grinned. "Because, y'know, there are some people who could stand to forget some things, like, y'know, a certain little girl and the lab she's from..."

Ford's eyes widened. Stan held up a hand.

"Wait," he said. "You mean we can just go in there and-"

"Make them forget about El!" Fiddleford bounced a little. "Then they'll stop hunting her!"

Stan whistled.

"That's actually brilliant," said Ford. "And it means we don't have to become mass murderers."

Stan whipped around and stared at him. "Really Ford?!"

Ford made a dismissive gesture. "I couldn't figure out another way ensure Eleven's safety," his face brightened. "But this would fix that perfectly!"

Fiddleford beamed.

"There are a few flaws with the idea though," said Ford.

Fiddleford's face fell. Stan sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Alright, Ford, what are they," said Stan.

"Well, for starters," said Ford. "There's only one gun and it can only erase one person's memory at a time. There are easily two hundred people working in that lab. They will overpower and capture us in minutes if we have to erase memories one at a time."

Fiddleford considered this. "I could make more guns," he said. "One fer each of us. And I could increase the output so that the beam hits, oh," he tilted his head. "Five. It could manage five people at once. Probably gonna have to use four double A's to power it though."

Stan stared. "You're using double A batteries to power a memory erasing gun?"

Fiddleford nodded. "Seemed the easiest thing to do."

"Being able to hit fifteen people at once will definitely help," said Ford. "But they still have security cameras in many of the hallways. If they see us coming they could ambush us."

"What if we cut the power?" said Stan. "I could do that, done it before."

"Then they wouldn't have lights or cameras," said Fiddleford.

"That could work," Ford nodded. "It's worth a shot, anyway. How long will it take you to make the modified memory guns, Fiddleford?"

Fiddleford hesitated, then, "Two days, maybe less."

Stan narrowed his eyes. "How long if it includes you actually getting sleep?"

Fiddleford sighed. "Stanley I'm not gonna be sleepin' anyway, I might as well be doin' somethin' useful."

"You're gonna at least rest," said Stan, firmly. "We'll rebuild the blanket fort if we have to."

Fiddleford gave in. "Three days," he said, sighing. "But that's also three days we lose lookin' for El."

"We'll find her," said Stan, as confidently as he could. "Ford can find her in the woods, and if she gets to civilization, well, I've been tracked down enough times to know how to do the reverse. But if we don't get that lab off our tails, and hers, then this is just gonna happen all over again after we get her back."

"I hate to say it, but Stan is right," said Ford. "The lab is the bigger problem, if we deal with it then we'll be able to devote more thought and resources to finding El."

"Alright," said Fiddleford, quietly. "But I don't like it."

"We'll get her back," Stan said again. He took a deep breath. "Now, about that blanket fort and sleeping..."

Notes for the Chapter:

That lab isn't gonna know what hit it.

14. A Need to Escape

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is a shorter one, but it features El being defiant and highlights what a terrible human being Brenner is.

I think after this there's maybe two or three chapters left and an epilogue. We're almost to the end! :D

Warnings for emotional abuse/manipulation and some brief physical abuse.

Eleven woke curled up on her bed. Except it wasn't her bed. It was hard and the blanket was scratchy and when she opened her eyes the ceiling was white, not brown.

And she was cold.

El shivered and sat up slowly, looking around her stark, white room in the lab. She had never minded it before, but after living in the cabin for weeks she was used to brown walls and being warm and having soft blankets.

She looked down at herself. They had taken her clothes away, even her socks, and left her in another hospital gown. She didn't remember that. When she had come back to the lab yesterday she had already been half asleep. She ached now, from running and using her powers, and every nerve in her body felt raw and bad.

She wanted to go home.

She sat curled up on the bed with her knees pulled to her chest, resting her chin on top of them. Tears slowly leaked out of her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

Maybe Stan and Ford and Fiddleford would come for her? But she had run away- would they be angry with her?

After a few moments she decided she would rather have them

be angry at her then be stuck with papa. And her friends had never gotten angry at her before.

But they didn't know where she was. El sniffled. She was lost and trapped and alone.

She pressed her forehead against her knees and cried quietly.

The door opened. El jerked awake, quickly uncurling from the ball she'd been in on the bed. When had she fallen asleep again?

It was papa. Another man was with him. She tensed and twisted the blanket in her hands.

"Good morning, Eleven," said Papa, sitting down next to her on the bed. She scooted as far away from him as possible, hands clenched into fists.

"I'm sure that the past few weeks have been difficult for you," said papa. "And the people who took you in will have told you all sorts of strange things. But now that you're back here, things will go back to normal." He smiled a not-real smile.

El glared at him. "No," she said, sitting up straighter.

Papa's not-real smile faded. "What?"

"No," El repeated. "I won't. Don't want to. Want to go home."

Papa's face got almost-angry. "This is your home, Eleven," he said, his voice sounding like Ford's when Ford was trying not to start yelling at Stan. "You don't belong with those people."

"They took care of me," said El.

"They would have used you for their own ends," said papa. "You were just a tool for them to use."

Now El was angry. Before she knew what she was doing she shot to her feet and screamed, "NO!"

Papa and the other man hit the walls, hard. Papa stumbled, but the other man slumped to the ground. El ran for the door and yanked it open, running down the hallway.

A hand grabbed her arm, hard enough to hurt. It squeezed and yanked her back and turned her around and when she looked up

papa looked angry.

“Obviously we will need to remind you of some things,” said Papa.

Footsteps hurried down the hall and three men appeared. They took her from papa and dragged her away. El lunged and fought and kicked, but they held her tight.

She knew where they were taking her even before they rounded the corner and she saw the door. It was the dark box, the closet. She screamed, and suddenly the men let go of her, tumbling to the ground. El crashed down after them. She scrambled up and started to run, but-

Papa's hand caught the back of her gown and yanked her back. “That's *enough*, Eleven!” he snapped.

He threw her in the dark room himself this time. He'd never done that before. She stared up at him in shock, nose bleeding, eyes wide. She saw something bad in his face, something she'd never noticed before but realized she'd seen dozens of times.

And she had never seen it in Stan, Ford and Fiddleford's faces.

Papa shut the door. El slumped back and curled up in a corner, shaking. Tears ran down her face. Her head hurt and she was still cold. She wanted to go *home*!

Finally her tears stopped and she shut her eyes. Nobody was here to help her, nobody knew where she was.

El frowned. Hadn't she heard something like that before? She thought for a few minutes until it came to her. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo had been alone in the dark under a mountain, far away from home, and he had been lost too. He had met a bad creature named Gollum who had played riddles with him and said he'd show Bilbo the way out.

El considered this. Maybe riddles wouldn't help her escape, but they did remind her of Fiddleford reading to her and doing funny

voices, and how Stanford had said that riddles could be useful in getting away from all sorts of bad creatures so she should learn lots of them. Ford and Fiddleford had helped her learn *The Hobbit's* riddles (Stan said they were silly, Ford said he only thought that because he wasn't good at riddles).

El took a deep breath. "Roots that nobody sees, taller than trees, up up goes, never grows. Mountain," she said softly, into the darkness.

She held her breath and waited. She had never said anything in here that wasn't a plea to be let out. Nothing happened. Gaining confidence, she continued.

"Box without hinges key and lid, inside gold treasure is hid," she said. "Egg."

El gave the tiniest smile and shut her eyes, trying to pretend she was safe and back home as she repeated the riddles.

El thought maybe it was the next day. She was hungry. They had given her food after they brought her out of the box, but it wasn't very good and there wasn't very much. When she woke up today they hadn't given her anymore.

She was in the room with the cold table and two chairs and the big window. Papa had told her to talk to the Demogorgon in here. She didn't like it. Why was it so cold? Why was everything white? She missed finding Ford and Fiddleford's papers on the floor and Stan's socks.

Papa walked inside. She started to look away but stopped. Papa was holding something-

Her backpack! El sat up quickly and leaned forward.

"Let's have a chat, Eleven," said Papa. His voice was quiet again, not angry. El hated it.

“You belong here,” said Papa. “You just seem to have forgotten that. So, until you remember I need you to behave.”

“No,” said El, folding her arms.

“Hmmm,” Brenner gave her a bad smile. “I think you will.”

Papa reached into her backpack and pulled out a worn, faded book. El’s eyes widened. *The Hobbit*! When she ran away she had forgotten to give it back to Fiddleford.

“What a silly book,” said papa. “But useful, for what I have in mind. You see, Eleven, books are very easy to destroy.” Papa opened the book and flipped through the pages. El sat on the edge of her seat, eyes wide and focused on the book.

“They can be torn,” Papa gave a tug on one of the pages and El heard a ripping noise. Her heart pounded and she lunged forward.

“No!” her fingers brushed the pages of the book before the other man in the room yanked her back into her seat. She’d forgotten he was there.

Papa didn’t seem upset. He took out a little box like one Stan had. Stan had told her it was called a “lighter” and that she shouldn’t play with it because it had fire inside that would hurt her.

Papa flicked the lighter open and held it under the book’s pages. “They can be burned,” fire suddenly appeared, licking at the edges of the pages. El yelled again and lunged forward, only to be forced back a second time.

Papa smiled a bad smile. “All sorts of terrible things can happen to books,” he said. “And it seems you don’t want them to happen to this book.” He set *The Hobbit* down on the table, so close and yet impossibly far from her.

“So, Eleven,” El dragged her eyes away from the book and up to Papa’s. “If you behave, I will not hurt the book. If you don’t behave, well,” he shrugged. “Anything could happen to it. Do you understand?”

El swallowed hard. She couldn’t let them hurt the book. It wasn’t even hers, and it reminded her of her friends.

She bowed her head and nodded.

“Good.”

15. Help is On the Way

It was late afternoon when the Mystery Trio arrived at Hawkins Lab. The sky was dark, with thunderclouds rumbling and scudding across it.

One moment the lab was humming and buzzing with activity, artificial lights shining weakly against the darkening sky.

The next, the lab was dark and silent.

Thunder cracked and the glass doors of the lab shattered. Lightning flashed, illuminating the three figures crunching over the glass.

The workers inside the lab stood frozen, unsure what to do. Someone started to yell-

-just before a beam of blue light cut them off.

Screams followed and were quickly silenced as the men and women in the lab had their memories erased. As they finished their sweep of the lobby, Ford's voice rang out in the sudden silence.

"There's been a breach in the nuclear reactor, get out of here while you still can!"

The men and women might not remember what they were doing in the lab, but the words "nuclear reactor" and "breach" still struck terror into them. As they ran for the broken doors out of the lab, they didn't even notice the three men walking the opposite way further into the lab.

Eleven was sitting curled up on her bed when the lights went out. She looked around uncertainly and pressed herself up against the wall.

Why would the lights go out? It wasn't the Gate, was it? The lights had gone out then, that was how she had escaped. Was it the monster?

El shuddered and squeezed her eyes shut. Maybe it was better if the monster got her. She didn't want to be here, but it had been days and no one had come to rescue her.

Papa made her do things. They wanted to see how powerful she was now, so they made her do harder and harder tests until her nose bled and her head hurt and she cried. She was exhausted and cold and she wanted to go *home*.

Maybe the door was unlocked now? Or maybe she could open it herself and escape?

But she was so, so tired, and there were men guarding her door now. If she tried to get out they would catch her and she wasn't strong enough to stop them. The thought of running all the way through the lab and trying to find the way out made her want to cry. It would hurt and she wasn't strong enough.

She wasn't strong enough.

A small sob escaped her.

She hoped that if the monster caught her it would be quick.

Stan, Ford and Fiddleford tore down the hallways of the lab, zapping anyone they saw, working their way further up and further in. The tour of the lab Brenner had given was serving them well, and Fiddleford's wandering filled in the few gaps.

They were, in fact, making their way down the same hallway where Fiddleford had lost Ford and Brenner last time when he noticed something strange.

Fiddleford stopped in the middle of the hallway, staring at a

door that had definitely not been locked the last time he was there.

Stan and Ford, further along the hall, stopped when they realized their friend wasn't with them.

"What is it, Fidds?" Stan asked. "I thought you did your sightseeing last time you were here?"

Fiddleford didn't look away from the door. "This is Eleven's room."

Ford and Stan exchanged a glance. "We'll find her, Fidds," said Stan.

"But we need to keep going," said Ford. "Speed and surprise are our best advantages right now."

Fiddleford shook his head. "I know, but, the door wasn't locked last time. Why would they..." he looked up at them and swallowed hard. "Why would they lock it again if there's nobody inside?"

There was a pause.

"Wait," said Stan. "You mean you think she's in there?"

"Could be," Fiddleford looked at him. "Can you get it open?"

"Pfft, 'course I can," said Stan, walking over. He pulled a credit card out of his pocket. "This is why I always keep some of Ford's stuff with me."

"Stanley!"

"You don't even use a credit card for anything, Sixer, now shut up and let me work."

In a few moments the door clicked. For good measure, Stan kicked it open. As it crashed back, the three men strode inside.

There was noise at the door, people talking, maybe. She didn't know what they were saying. Then there was a strange sound and a click that meant the door was going to open. El curled up tighter. Why were they coming to get her *now*?

The door *slammed* open. El jumped and jerked back, squeezing her eyes shut. Nobody had *ever* opened her door that way. Were they angry? She hadn't done anything!

"El?"

Her eyes flew open at the familiar voice. She looked up and-

And there they were. Stan, Ford and Fiddleford, staring at her with wide eyes.

She scrambled off the bed so fast her feet got tangled in the blanket.

She fell.

Strong hands caught her and scooped her up and when she felt herself wrapped in a tight hug that she knew was from Stan. A few seconds later she felt Fiddleford and Ford join the hug too.

She was crying. She wanted to hug all of them all at once. She sobbed and they held her tighter and she buried her face in Stan's jacket.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I-I'm sorry-"

"You don't have anything to be sorry for, El," said Fiddleford.

"Yeah, we're the ones that lost you," said Stan.

El shook her head. "I ran," she said in a small voice.

"It was still our job to look after you," said Ford.

"And we couldn't find you in the woods," Fiddleford added.

They weren't mad, they said sorry to her. To *her*, even though she'd messed up everything and this was all her fault anyway and-

"C'mon, kid," said Stan. "We gotta get movin' so we can get you home."

El laugh-sobbed. "Home."

Stan carried El out of her cell and gently set her on the ground. Fiddleford took her hand and she huddled against him.

“Okay,” said Stan. “We got the kid, now what?”

“Now,” said a voice. “You surrender.”

The three men whipped around. Standing not ten feet from them with a group of armed men behind him was Brenner. El whimpered and clung to Fiddleford, half hiding behind him.

“Look, I dunno who you think you are,” said Stan, raising his memory gun. “But you better get the heck outta our way.”

“That’s Brenner,” said Ford, mildly. “And Stanley, they have guns.”

Something in Stan’s expression changed, turning it from annoyed to outright furious. “Oh, so *you’re* Brenner.”

“Yes, and as your friend so helpfully pointed out I have a group of armed men with me,” said Brenner, calmly. “So hand over Eleven and no one has to get hurt.”

“You can take her over our dead bodies you demented, ugly mudsucker!” spat Fiddleford.

“And you can go to Hell,” said Stan. “Bet they got a nice torture chamber down there for people who hurt kids.”

Brenner’s eyes hardened for a moment, then he spoke softly. “Eleven, you don’t want your friends to get hurt, do you?”

El, peeking out from behind Fiddleford, shook her head.

“Don’t you dare speak to her!” said Ford, stepping forward and leveling the memory gun at Brenner’s head. “Or I’ll erase your whole mind in good conscience.”

“Eleven,” said Brenner. “Come with me and I promise I won’t hurt them.”

There was a pause, then El spoke, her voice shaking a little. “Go to, Hell, mudsucker.”

“That’s my girl!” Stan grinned.

Brenner sighed and waved a hand. The soldiers stepped forward.

There was a massive CRACK as the guns snapped in half with

an invisible force. El stumbled and Fiddleford caught her before she tumbled to the ground.

Stan roared and lunged forward, swinging his fist at Brenner's face. The older man fell back, slamming into the wall as blood gushed from his nose.

There were three flashes in rapid succession and the guards tumbled to the ground, looking around in confusion.

Brenner looked up at them and shook his head. "You have no idea what you're dealing with," he said.

"A sick psychopath who tortures kids," said Stan. "And I'd hit you again, but we're in a hurry. Gotta erase the memories of everyone in your lab before they figure out what we're doing and all that. Now where'd I put that memory gun?"

Stan stepped back and there was a flash of light. He turned and saw Fiddleford kneeling on the ground, one arm around Eleven and one still pointing the gun at Brenner's head.

Brenner blinked, frowning. "Where am I?" he asked, looking around.

"You're in a nuclear facility," said Ford, repeating the same thing they'd told everyone else. "The reactor has been breached and radiation is leaking out. It's affected your memory. You need to leave."

The soldiers scrambled up and ran, but Brenner continued to stare at them. "Do any of you happen to know my name?" he asked.

Ford blinked, glanced at Fiddleford, then shrugged. "John Smith?"

"Oh, alright, thank you," Brenner stood and pointed in the direction the soldiers had gone. "It's that way?"

"Yes," Ford snapped. "Go!"

Brenner ran off without another word. The three men watched him go, then looked at each other.

"We shoulda just killed him," said Stan. "But I guess erasing all his memories was the next best thing."

"I'd just rather not become a murderer in front of our child, Stan," said Fiddleford.

"Is she alright?" Ford asked. He and Stan hurried over.

El looked up at them when they approached. There were dark circles under her eyes and blood around her nose and ears. She sighed and shut her eyes, but continued to breathe evenly.

"I think she's just exhausted," said Fiddleford. "Who knows what they did to her before we got here?"

"In that case," said Ford. "We need to keep going. This has taken too much time already."

"If you two can manage, I'll take El back to the lobby," said Fiddleford. "We can wait for y'there."

"Sounds good," said Stan, retrieving his memory gun from where he'd dropped it. "Ready to finish this thing, Ford?"

Ford nodded. "Let's go."

Notes for the Chapter:

One confrontation is past, another still awaits.

Stan has now punched both Brenner and the demogorgon, which I, personally, find very satisfying, so I hope you do too. xD

16. The Upside Down

"This is the last floor, right?"

"As far as I know."

Stan and Ford lowered their memory guns as they reached the end of the hallway on the top floor of Hawkins Lab.

"Well that's it then," said Stan. "Let's go find Fidds and the kid."

"Actually..."

Stan looked at his brother sharply. "What?"

Ford looked down and shoved the memory gun and his hands into his pockets. "Well, I was just thinking, while we're here shouldn't we have a look at the Gate? We should at least see if it has continued to spread..."

"Ford," said Stan, shaking his head. "I don't think that's a good idea. Besides, the elevators won't be working, remember?"

"The emergency power has turned on," said Ford. "I could re-route it to the elevators."

"Are you gonna do it whether I come with you or not?" Stan asked.

Ford paused, then drew himself up. "I- yes. Yes I will. I want to see this Gate and its effects for myself."

Stan sighed. "Fine. But we're only stayin' long enough to have a quick look around. I don't like leavin' Fidds and the kid alone in this place- especially with that monster still around."

"It lives in the forest, Stanley, and this is a building, so far we have no evidence of it attacking people in a building."

"Doesn't mean it can't happen," said Stan. "We did break down the doors. Anyway, let's get moving, we're wasting time."

"Thank you, Stanley."

"Shut up and move it, Pointdexter."

Fiddleford and El hadn't gone very far when El stopped them.

Fiddleford was carrying her and she reached up and tugged on his collar to get his attention.

Fiddleford looked down and saw she had her head resting on his shoulder, tilted up at him. "What is it, sweetheart?"

"Book," she said, quietly.

He frowned. "What?"

"*The Hobbit*," she said, with an effort. "Papa had it."

"Oh, so that's where it got to," said Fiddleford. "I forgot you took it with you."

El looked down. "Sorry."

"Naw, it's okay. D'you know where it was bein' kept? Maybe we can find it, it'll take Stan and Ford a while to finish up what they're doin' and if we meet anybody I'll just zap 'em with this," he waved the memory gun in one hand. El smiled a little. "Maybe we can find some of your clothes too." He had given her his coat, which had at least stopped her shivering, but it would be nice to find her some shoes and pants, since it was bound to be colder outside and it was a long trek back to where they'd left their car.

"So, got any ideas as to where your stuff might be?" Fiddleford asked.

El considered this and nodded. She pointed along the hallway. "That way. Right."

"Okie dokie then."

They wandered around the lab for a while, searching. There weren't many people left in the areas they went through, but Fiddleford made sure to erase the memories of anyone they encountered. They checked several rooms unsuccessfully (including one with just a table, two chairs and observation glass that made El shiver and cling to his shirt) and eventually found what they were looking for quite by accident. Fiddleford happened to look into an open doorway and see a room full of lockers. One of the open ones had the backpack he'd given to El, along with her clothes (all neatly catalogued). While he was pulling it out Eleven found *The Hobbit* in a desk drawer and presented it to him triumphantly.

Fiddleford grinned at her. "Good job. Here, we'll stick the book in yer backpack and zip it up so nothin' happens to it. Now let's get you dressed so you can stop shiverin'!"

A few minutes later he carried her out of the room, her backpack slung over his shoulders. El seemed calmer now, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head down with a little sigh.

They headed back to the entrance of the lab. Fiddleford sat behind the reception desk with El on his lap and waited. El fell asleep. Fiddleford doodled in a notebook on the desk. Every once and a while a group of people ran out into the lobby, making for the shattered glass doors.

It had been a while since the last person hurried past and Fiddleford sat back, frowning. The lab was big, but surely Stan and Ford must have cleared everyone out by now, right? Maybe they were just being thorough and checking for stragglers. He hoped they hadn't run into any trouble.

Fiddleford sighed and looked out the lab's massive glass windows. He shivered. It was a cold night, but at least the rain had stopped.

A shadow flitted outside. Fiddleford sat up, frowning, trying to keep his breathing steady. It was nothing, it was probably just a raccoon.

But a feeling of dread settled in the pit of his stomach and he held El a little tighter.

'Stanford, Stanley, where are you?'

The elevator creaked down towards the lab's basement. Stan stood with his arms folded in the middle of the space. Just to one side of him stood Ford, suitably subdued now that they were in an elevator streaked with human blood, descending into a hallway of unknown horrors.

Stan had acquired a gun from one of the soldiers they'd sent packing and he held it loosely in one hand. He was glad to have some

sort of weapon beyond his fists, since punching the Demogorgon hadn't had the desired result and it possible, if not likely, that they would encounter it.

The elevator shuddered to a stop and the doors eased open. This place had the weirdest elevator door Stan had ever seen, but that seemed the least of their troubles at the moment.

The hallway they entered was even creepier than Fiddleford had described. Stan was honestly impressed that the man hadn't taken one look at it and run back to the elevator screaming.

There was a dim, ethereal light all around them, reflecting off the weird white specs floating around them and illuminating the-

"Holy Moses, Fidds wasn't kidding about the vines," said Stan, walking over to where Ford was examining the slimy tendrils.

Ford tapped one with his pen. "They seemed to be covered in some sort of mucus-like membrane."

"That sounds disgusting. Now that you've shared that wonderful tidbit with me can we get going?"

Ford sighed. "I suppose."

They walked down the hallway, Stan using a flashlight to cut through the fog-like atmosphere.

"Hey, didn't you say this stuff was toxic?" said Stan, suddenly.

"Hmm, well, yes. I suppose we should have covered our faces before venturing down here."

Stan sighed and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Thanks, Sixer. Anything else we should've done?"

"Well it would be nice to have some scientific equipment with me, and possibly a hazmat suit, but-"

"Nevermind, I don't wanna know."

Stan wasn't sure if it was ten minutes or an hour before he had to start stepping over vines and an eerie red light appeared in front of them. Ford suddenly grabbed his sleeve and pointed. "Stanley, look!"

There, set into one wall, was a large, oozing red gash. Spilling out of it were more of the slimy vines, and it radiated a feeling that felt ancient and evil. That had to be the Gate, there was nothing else it *could* be.

Before Stan could so much as make a disgusted comment, Ford was already picking his way through the vines over to the gap. Stan sighed and followed.

“Look at the size of this!” Ford gestured eagerly. “It’s certainly large enough to have allowed the monster through, and there’s wind coming out of it! Imagine that, Stanley, wind from an alternate dimension!”

“*Toxic* wind from an alternate dimension,” said Stan. “Can we get outta here now Ford?”

Ford wasn’t listening. He was scurrying around the Gate, taking notes. Stan shook his head and noted his own observations about it. Mainly that it was creepy and- wait, was it *moving*?! Stan took a step back. The flesh-like tear seemed to be rising and falling as if it were...

Breathing.

“Ford, I think this thing is alive,” said Stan, shining his flashlight up and down the Gate. “We better get outta here before it eats us or somethin’.”

“Actually...” said Ford, turning to him and clasping his hands behind his back nervously.

Stan stared at him blankly. “No.”

“Stanley, it’s another world! What if we never get an opportunity like this again?!” said Ford, throwing out his arms. “I would regret it for the rest of my life!”

“I wouldn’t,” said Stan, calmly. “That Gate thing is alive and that world you wanna see is where the Demogorgon came from. If I never see anything from that place again it’ll be too soon.”

Ford folded his arms. “I’ll go in without you.”

“Ford, you’re really telling me that none of this freaks you out?!” Stan gestured at the vines, the breathing gate and the contaminated air.

Ford looked away. “I just want to understand it,” he said,

quietly. "It disturbs me on some level, but," he met Stan's eyes. "I have questions. Why is it spreading? Why could Eleven contact the Demogorgon in the first place? Is the Upside Down a parallel world or an entirely different one? Whatever is on the other side of the Gate may be able to answer my questions. I have to at least try."

Stan sighed and pinched his nose. "You are the *dumbest* nerd. Fine, but if I get eaten I'm haunting you forever."

Ford grinned. "Thank you, Stanley."

"Yeah, yeah, let's just get this over with," Stan looked distastefully at the Gate. "You sure you wanna walk through this thing?"

Ford winced. "No, but great sacrifices must be made for science."

"You're gonna get mucus in your hair."

Ford glared at him. Stan shrugged and pulled up the hood of his coat. "Hey, not my fault you had to have the trenchcoat and not wear a hat."

Ford rolled his eyes. "Come on."

Walking through the Gate was every bit as disgusting as Stan had imagined it would be. The folds of the Gate (he tried not to think of them as skin) sucked at him and left damp patches on his clothes. He kept his head down and tried to avoid getting any goop on his face and stoically ignored it when he didn't succeed.

Finally they emerged out the other side. Stan looked over at Ford and snorted. His hair was indeed now covered in strings of mucus.

Ford glared at him. "If you could focus, Stanley, we are making history here."

"If we're making history then I am sure gonna make notes about what you look like right now," grinned Stan.

Then he turned and got his first look at the Upside Down.

Any humor he had felt a moment ago drained out of him. The landscape before him had the same darkness hanging over it that the lab's basement had, only worse, somehow, because it spread over everything. This was a land that had never known the sun, moon or

stars. They were standing in the yard outside the lab and he could see the forest stretched out before him. Except it didn't look like the forest he knew. The trees here were barren and blackened, twisted into unnatural shapes. The ground was covered in ash instead of grass, and an oppressive stillness hung over the world.

Stan turned and jerked back, resisting the urge to run. The lab stood behind them, but it was a ruined structure, covered so thickly in vines that he could hardly tell there was still a building under it. It was as if the world had been nuked and all that survived were the worst parts.

He looked at Ford and was comforted at seeing his own horror reflected in his brother's face. If even Ford thought this place was awful then it must be as bad as it seemed.

"I, I never imagined," said Ford, quietly. "I didn't, this place, I-"

"Yeah," said Stan. "Not even I thought it'd be this bad."

"I'm sorry," Ford said, his voice barely a whisper.

Stan clapped him on the shoulder. "C'mon, Sixer, let's get outta here."

As they turned to go movement caught Stan's eye. He frowned as he watched a shadow make its way through the woods towards the lab.

"Better hurry," he said, grabbing his brother and dragging him back into the Gate. Once they were on the other side they ran, and didn't stop until they had to wait for the elevator to open.

"What did you see?" Ford panted. Stan was just relieved that for once Ford had waited to question his actions.

"The monster, I think," said Stan as the elevator began to take them up again. "We gotta get back to Fidds an' the kid."

Ford nodded. "I'm sorry, Stanley, I should have listened to you-"

Stan shook his head. "Can it, Pointdexter, I'm not mad. Wondering about what was on the other side of that Gate would have eaten away at you till you came back here anyway. I'd rather be with you when you do something stupid."

Ford nodded, smiling a little. "I prefer that as well."

"I just hope we ditched the Demogorgon," said Stan. "Maybe we can get back to the woods before it figures out where we went."

Little did they know that the Demogorgon was not after them.

Notes for the Chapter:

There was no way Ford wasn't going to try and go into the Upside Down, so I just... let him. Luckily Stan was there to keep an eye on him.

Next chapter is the climax! :D

17. The Demogorgon and the Little Girl

Notes for the Chapter:

And now a very short and dramatic chapter for you.
Just one more chapter and the epilogue after this!

Fiddleford stood next to the reception desk armed with a broom he'd found in a closet. It was not a very good weapon, but it was comforting to know that he could at least hit anything that might jump out at him.

After seeing the shadow outside the lab he had very carefully eased El off of him and left her curled up on the chair. After retrieving the broom from the closet set into the wall of the lobby he had taken up his station by the desk.

It was a few minutes after that that El stirred. She sat up, rubbing her eyes and looking around uncertainly. He walked over and stood next to her.

"Sorry to wake you, El, but this place was givin' me the creeps," he said. "Needed to have something in my hands that I could whack somebody with, an' since I left my banjo at home I figured this broom would do."

He forced himself to smile, and El smiled back at him.

They stayed that way for a little bit, until Eleven suddenly grabbed his arm and pointed. At the same time, Fiddleford felt cold dread wash over him as the temperature dropped and the dim emergency lights flickered.

"Demogorgon," Eleven whispered.

Fiddleford gripped the broom tighter as his hands started to shake. El climbed off the chair and stood close to him, her little hands reaching up to grip fistfuls of his coat.

"It'll be okay," he said, even as his voice shook.
El pressed closer to him.

A dark shadow slunk through the door of the lab on all fours. Fiddleford dared to hope it was a bear for a moment before it rose up on two legs, its bulbous head raised as it sniffed the air.

“El, when I tell y’to run, run into the woods,” he whispered. “Get inter a tree and stay there till somebody finds you, y’hear?”

The Demogorgon turned towards his voice. It was now or never.

‘Don’t think about it, don’t think about it-’

Fiddleford screamed as loud as he could and charged at the monster. He hit it as hard as he could with the broom handle then scrambled out of reach of its arms. The monster opened its face and roared at him. He whacked its head with the broom bristles, shrieking wildly all the while.

“EL RUN!” he shouted. He didn’t look to see if she did.

The Demogorgon bit down on the broom head and jerked it to one side. It was *strong*. Fiddleford, hands still locked around the broom handle, found himself spinning through the air and sliding across the floor with the wind knocked out of him. He pushed himself up with an effort and found he was still holding the broomstick (though the head was gone). He aimed it like a spear and ran, still screaming, at the Demogorgon.

But it was ready this time. It caught the stick in its hands and yanked it away, throwing it to the side. Fiddleford backed up, but not quick enough. The monster grabbed him and threw him against the wall.

His head smacked into the wall and his vision went black. When it cleared, he saw the monster standing over him, mouth open and slavering. He really, really wished that that wasn’t going to be the last thing he saw before he died, and if he hadn’t been so winded he might have laughed hysterically.

The monster lunged. Fiddleford screwed his eyes shut.

“NO!”

His eyes flew open again and he realized his vision was fuzzy. Had he lost his glasses? He looked up and saw the Demogorgon frozen above him. Not far away he could make out Eleven, a small, blurry shape with one hand raised.

“El-” he tried to push himself up but he was too weak and unsteady. “El, no-”

El had watched, terrified, as Fiddleford fought the monster. She had started to run like he’d told her too, but she knew if she left he’d die, and she couldn’t let that happen.

She kept hoping that Stan and Ford would appear, but they didn’t, and all too quickly the Demogorgon overpowered Fiddleford. It threw him against the wall and she was running. She didn’t have a plan.

But she wasn’t going to let one of her friends die because of the monster she’d let out.

“NO!” she screamed as the monster lunged. She raised her hand and the Demogorgon froze.

She shuddered and shook her head. It *hurt*. Her concentration faltered and the Demogorgon turned away from Fiddleford and towards her.

It roared. She screamed back at it.

It charged.

El raised her hand. The monster froze again. She walked closer to it, backing them up until the Demogorgon thudded against the wall.

She was going to fix this.

A shout and movement distracted her for just a second. Stan

and Ford ran out of the lab. They started towards her, Stan yelling her name.

She threw up her other hand and knocked them back. No. This was her mistake. She was going to fix it. No one else was going to get hurt.

She concentrated ever ounce of her power on the Demogorgon, which was writhing and growling in her grasp. She held it tighter. Ash floated through the air.

It hurt. She started to scream as the power drained out of her and wave after wave of it crashed into the monster. It was screaming too.

Ash swirled all around them. El risked one last glance at the three men who had loved her and looked after her. They watched her, terrified and desperate.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Then she turned back to the Demogorgon. With a final scream and burst of power, the ash engulfed them.

The Demogorgon exploded into nothingness.

Eleven fell into darkness, and knew no more.

Notes for the Chapter:

... I bet you didn't expect this story to have Fiddleford fighting the demogorgon with a broom, did you?

18. Darkness will Not Overcome

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone! So sorry for leaving you all on such a cliffhanger, my grandma was in the hospital for a few days, and she's okay now, but that sort of thing tends to mess up one's schedule, especially since my mental health wasn't great anyway.

But I have a chapter for you now! After this we have the epilogue and this part of the story will be finished. There is another fic that is connected to this one that I'm planning to write that will be based on something that happened in Journal 3. After that I don't know. I hope you have enjoyed this story and will enjoy the ending!

Eleven was gone. She and the Demogorgon had simply vanished, leaving nothing behind but a pile of ash and dust.

The three men were frozen. Ford and Stan were sitting on the ground where they'd fallen when El pushed them back. Fiddleford was still lying beside the wall where the Demogorgon had thrown him. For a long time, none of them dared move. They all stared at the dust as if hoping Eleven would pop out of it, safe and sound.

Finally, Stan stood and walked over to the pile of ash. He took a handful of it and let it sift through his fingers, staring numbly at it.

Then, all at once he sprang to his feet and shouted, "EL!" at the top of his lungs. Fiddleford flinched. Ford just stared at his brother.

"Stanley, she's, she's not," Ford tried.

"Not what?" demanded Stan. "She can't be dead! There's no body or nothin'! Where'd she disappear to? We gotta find her!"

Stan looked around, as if he expected Eleven to suddenly appear somewhere else in the lobby.

Ford shook his head. "It- it seems likely that she used up her powers to kill the Demogorgon," he said quietly. "And when nothing was left, she-" he glanced at the pile of ash and his breath hitched.

Before Stan could reply there was a muffled sob and the brothers looked over and properly noticed Fiddleford for the first time.

"Hey, Fidds, are you okay?" Stan hurried over.

Fiddleford was shaking and crying, and when Stan tried to pull him up he cried out. Stan pulled his hands back worriedly for a second, then- more gently this time- propped Fiddleford in a sitting position against the wall. Ford walked over and sat beside them and handed Fiddleford his glasses, which had survived the attack with only one cracked lens.

"What happened?" Stan asked.

"Th-that thing, the monster, showed up," Fiddleford managed between sobs. "It- I told 'er to run, I did, she didn't listen, I-I tried, I tried." He covered his face with his hands.

"This is my fault," said Ford miserably. "If I hadn't delayed us we would have gotten here in time to help and-"

"Stop it, Ford," said Stan. "We don't know that. And there's no point in tryin' to figure out what might have happened when we gotta deal with what *did* happen."

Stan gently put his hands on Fiddleford's shoulders. "Fidds, what exactly did that thing do to you? Are you hurt?"

Fiddleford swallowed and looked down. "Threw me against a wall, I-I guess," he mumbled. "I t-tried to fight it off with a-a broom."

Stan laughed suddenly. "Fidds, if I wasn't afraid of breaking you right now I'd hug you. You crazy hillbilly!"

Ford scooted closer. "It looks like you have a bump on your head, Fiddleford, you probably have a concussion."

"An' some broken ribs considerin' how you flinched when I tried to move you," added Stan. "You were lucky."

"No I wasn't," said Fiddleford. "El saved me." He squeezed his eyes shut but tears slid down his cheeks anyway. "An' now she's gone an' I-I-" he shook his head.

Stan stood. "Well she ain't gonna be gone for long. We're gonna find her."

Ford frowned up at him. "Stanley, I told you, her power must have, well, burned her up for lack of a better phrase."

"Maybe not," said Stan. "You remember the first time that thing attacked us? In the woods? It ran off through some sorta tear in one of the trees. It looked a lot like that Gate did. El's already opened a door to the Upside Down once, who's to say she couldn't do it again? Maybe she got scared and it happened as a sorta defense mechanism or somethin'."

"Well," said Ford. "That is possible, maybe..." he looked up at Stan, then sprang to his feet. "Alright, I'll help you look for her. Fiddleford, you stay here and--"

"Oh no, you two ain't leavin' me again," said Fiddleford, dragging himself up with a hiss of pain. "Specially not to-to go lookin' for El."

"Well, alright, I suppose," said Ford, frowning. "Though I don't think you should be walking."

"Then help him, Pointdexter, you don't need your arms for this, just your voice," said Stan. "An' I know that's plenty loud. Now c'mon, nerds, we gotta find our kid before somethin' else bad happens to her."

Eleven woke up.

It was dark. And cold. And she felt sick.

As soon as she had that last thought she gagged and rolled over onto her side, throwing up the meager contents of her stomach. She squeezed her eyes shut and fell back against the ground, breathing hard.

She opened her eyes again. This time she recognized the place. It was a hallway in the lab, but Wrong. This place was covered in vines and the lights were all dim.

El sat up, fear making her heart beat too fast. She knew this place. This was where the monster was from.

The Upside Down.

She needed to get out of here. She pressed one hand against the wall and pulled herself up, though every bone in her body protested the movement. She pulled her hand from the wall and realized it was covered in slime. She shuddered and wiped her hand on her pants.

She had to reach out and touch the wall again though to keep walking. She stumbled, tripping over rocks and vines, almost wishing she would fall so she could go back to sleep.

But she had to keep moving. The demogorgon might be gone but this place was bad, and who knew what other monsters might live here.

She paused. She thought she could hear someone yelling for her. Calling her name.

She stumbled along a little faster, hoping to find a way out. Where was the Gate? She could escape through the Gate, couldn't she? But that was deep down in the lab and she didn't want to go there. She had been close to the doors to the outside when she fought the Demogorgon and the doors had been open. Maybe she could get back that way?

A red tear in the wall caught her eye. It wasn't solid like the rest of the wall, maybe...

El knelt down and reached her hand through the gap. It pressed through the icky gunk and slime until her fingers were free and she could wiggle them in the air beyond. She could escape!

El pulled her hand back and stood. Shakily she lifted her hand. She was so tired, and her head throbbed as she channeled her power slowly at the wall. Stones began to crumble away, tumbling to the ground as the gap widened until it was big enough for her to climb through.

Eleven had never been so happy to find herself in the lab. She stepped out of the gap and looked around. It was still dark, and she just wanted to curl up on the ground and sleep until she felt better.

Then she heard voices shouting.

“ELEVEN!”

“EL!”

“KID WHERE ARE YOU?!”

They were looking for her. Ford and Fiddleford and Stan. She had to find them.

Exhausted as she was, El shuffled towards their voices, running her hand along the wall and forcing herself just one more step, just one more step, one more step, one more...

She came around a corner and saw them. She almost collapsed in relief. They were okay. They could take her home.

‘Please. Home.’

She was gathering herself to speak when Stan turned towards her.

Stan was beginning to doubt his own theory. They had been searching for at least half an hour and there was no sign of Eleven.

But, just like in the forest, he refused to be the one to admit defeat first. His voice was hoarse from shouting but he kept calling for the little girl anyway. Behind him, Ford was helping Fiddleford limp along while they yelled Eleven’s name, sounding as tired and hopeless as Stan felt.

“KID WHERE ARE YOU?!” he called into the darkness, hoping vainly for an answer.

'Face it, Stan, Ford's right. The kid's gone.'

Stan shook his head. No. He wouldn't give up. He was going to keep looking until he found Eleven or until they found proof she was really gone. He wasn't going to fail her.

Stan turned, mouth already open to call out again.

He froze.

Standing there, looking ragged and exhausted, covered in that horrible Upside Down slime, was Eleven, watching him.

"ELEVEN!" he yelped, running forward. He picked the little girl up and spun her through the air. She laughed breathlessly and he lowered her into his arms and hugged her.

"Kid," he laughed as tears ran down his face. "We thought we lost you kid."

"Eleven!"

Stan laughed again as Fiddleford, in defiance of all his injuries, threw himself into the hug. Ford grinned, but held back until Stan beckoned him over. Ford glanced down.

"Stanley, Eleven, Fiddleford, I really am sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have convinced Stan to go down and investigate the Upside Down with me, if I hadn't we might have been able to help and—"

Eleven reached out a little hand and grabbed his coat sleeve, tugging him towards them. "Can it, pointdexter," she said quietly, smiling a little.

Fiddleford snorted and Stan burst out laughing. Ford chuckled and rubbed his eyes, finally joining the hug.

After they had stood there for a few minutes, Stan took a deep breath. "Alright, nerds, kid, how's about we head home?"

Eleven nestled against his chest and a warm feeling spread through him. "Home," she agreed.

Eleven fell asleep on the way home. Stan was carrying her and she felt safe. There was nothing left to hurt her. The bad men were gone, the Demogorgon was gone, and her friends were with her.

She woke up while Stan was carrying her inside. He set her down in the living room, on the floor next to Fiddleford. She snuggled against Fiddleford and watched as Stan and Ford bustled around, gathering pillows and blankets. After not very long they had built another blanket fort.

They crawled inside and curled up together, El snuggled safely inbetween her friends.

Her family.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't do unhappy endings. :)

Now, on to the epilogue!

19. Epilogue: The Triangle and the Shadow Monster

Notes for the Chapter:

... Okay, so this exists literally just in case I ever decide to write season 2. If I never do, well, then, feel free to do as you will with this.

Disclaimer: This is. the first time I have ever written Bill. and I have a headache. xD

The Upside Down was cold and dark and still. Not even a breath of wind stirred the branches of the rotting trees, and ash fell from the sky like snow. The only sound was a quiet, rhythmic noise like a great beast breathing in and out.

POP!

Color burst into the dreary, desolate landscape as a bright yellow triangle simply appeared, floating above the trees.

The triangle's one eye scanned the trees. If it had had a mouth it might have smiled.

"Well, well, the Upside Down, it's been a while! Love what you've done with the place, old friend!"

A shadow rose up from the horizon like a perverse sunrise. It unfolded, revealing legs and a head with no features.

"Bill Cipher," it said in a voice that boomed like thunder and grated like gravel. "So you did come."

"Course I did! I'd never miss out a chance to help my old buddy the Mind Flayer!" said Bill, cheerfully.

"Hmm," rumbled the shadow monster. "I've missed that name. It once struck fear into the hearts of everyone in the multiverse," the creature seemed to scoff. "Now they use it for the name of a monster in a game. Pah!"

The Mind Flayer stamped one of its legs, crushing a vine-covered apartment building and grinding it to dust.

“So what’s this about a way out?” Bill asked, floating closer to the shadow.

“The humans opened a portal,” said the Mind Flayer, sounding as if it were smiling. “My creatures and poisons can now enter their world. But there is a problem,” its voice grew dangerous. “The gateway is too small. I cannot escape,” it seemed to stare meaningfully at Bill. “I cannot fulfill our deal.”

“Whaddya want me to do about it?” asked Bill, flying in a circle around the Mind Flayer’s head. “I’m as trapped as you are!”

“Not quite,” rumbled the Mind Flayer. “You can watch the humans.”

“Humans are boring!”

“I need one,” the Mind Flayer went on, ignoring Bill’s interruption. “Find one for me and one for you that we can use to control and open the portal further. Then I will escape and tear open reality for you and we can torment the multiverse once more.”

“Hmm, not bad, not bad. Alright, Mindee, it’s a deal.” Bill’s eye flickered. “And I know just the human for the job.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Of course Bill Cipher and the Mind Flayer would be friends, what did you expect?

There's a whole backstory/theory I came up with to explain that that I'm too tired to talk about right now, but if you wanna know feel free to ask me in the comments. Or not. That's fine too.

I hope you enjoyed this story! Be on the lookout for the other one I'm planning to write that's set in this AU!